

This carefully selected anthology of twenty-one short stories exhibit Kamleshwar's popularity as a forceful story writer. His stories depict the trials and tribulations of an evanescent social milieu. One can sense the author's groping through the horrors of contemporary society for new values in the face of disintegration of old system. His strength lies in his sympathetic attitude and lack of romanticism within the framework of his theme.

Born in Mainpuri district of Uttar Pradesh, Kamleshwar started his career as a journalist and has been associated with well known magazines, TV and radio and was for two years the Additional Director General of Doordarshan. Some of his more important novels include *Samudra Main Khoya Hua Aadmi*, *Dak Bangla*, *Laute Hue Musafir*, *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan*, *Teesra Aadmi* and *Kali Andhi*. Prominent among his short story collections are *Raja Wirbansia*, *Kasbe*, *Aadmi*, *Zinda Murde*, *Bayan* and others.

ISBN 8-17167-308-2



Rs. 145

THE BLUE LAKE & OTHER STORIES



KAMLESHWAR

THE BLUE LAKE
& OTHER STORIES

THE BLUE LAKE & OTHER STORIES

Kamleshwar

Translated by

Jai Ratan
Khushwant Singh
Bhisham Sahni
Gordon C Roadarmel
M.M. Jain
Satish Verma

Rupa & Co.

© Kamleshwar 1996

A Rupa Original

Published by

Rupa & Co

15 Bankim Chatterjee Street, Calcutta 700 073

135 South Malaka, Allahabad 211 001

P.G. Solanki Path, Lamington Road, Bombay 400 007

7/16 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi 110 002

Typeset in Baskerville by

Megatechnics

19A Ansari Road

New Delhi 110 002

Printed in India by

Ahad Enterprises

2609, Baradari, Ballimaran

Delhi 110 006

Rs. 145

ISBN 81-7167-308-2

Contents

The Wait (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	1
Those Halcyon Days (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	12
The House With Sixteen Roofs	26
The Blue Lake (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	37
Not By Flesh Alone (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	55
The Swans of Mansarovar (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	69
The King With No Progeny (Translated by <i>M.M. Jain</i>)	77
Summer Days (Translated by <i>Satish Verma & Khushwant Singh</i>)	103
The Quest (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	110
That Which Remains Unsaid (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	120
Lost Directions (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	130
The Cinnamon Jungles (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	145
Mariam (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	155
The People of My Country (Translated by <i>Jai Ratan</i>)	165

Those Nights (Translated by Jai Ratan)	170
How Many Pakistans? (Translated by Jai Ratan)	175
The World of the Dead (Translated by Jai Ratan)	191
Call the Next Witness . . . (Translated by Jai Ratan)	202
It's a Wide Wide World (Translated by Jai Ratan)	211
The Alien City (Translated by Bhisham Sahni)	218
A Death in Delhi (Translated by Gordon C. Roadarmat)	227

THE WAIT

It was a dark and dreadful night. Darkness seemed to have seeped into the wild scrub and was slowly dripping from it. Small slabs of stone jutting out of a rocky terrain at irregular intervals looked like squatting frogs from a distance. The staccato sound of Vigilante boots added to the fear. The wind, untrammelled as always, blew with complete abandon where it listed. Producing a rustling and swishing sound, it sang on remorselessly through the eerie silence, sending a tremor of fear through the heart. It continued on and on, to be interrupted momentarily only when boots of the Vigilante squad struck with a jarring note on the carpet of sand or grated against the small frog-like stone slabs.

The small Tumahol habitation on the Freetown outskirts of Parez city was wide awake. But there was no light in the houses. The Vigilante boots are afraid of light. Wherever they see a glimmer of light they make a frenzied rush to put it out. They are also afraid of the stones against which their boots strike or the ones which whizz past their ears in the dark.

How these stones that squat like frogs on the ground manage to fly in the air at night was a mystery which these roving vigilantes were unable to unravel.

Once a soldier of the roving squad had complained to the black padre, "Holy father, these stones fly at night, a supernatural phenomenon, if I may say so. When we were deputed to the Tumahol habitation outside the Freetown area we were not warned that the place was infested by ghosts. We were only told that niggers live in Tumahol. But what did we find there? Flying stones!"

On hearing this the black priest in the cottage-like church lit by candles had smiled. "My son, Tumahol is not the abode of ghosts and genies. Satan had taken birth somewhere else. Try to identify him, ferret him out. It will give you peace of mind."

The soldier stood there rubbing his swollen eye and his temple. As he blew his nose, he got unnerved on seeing drops of blood coming out of his nostrils.

The hospital had sent out the report that cadet 301 was not quite sound in his mind — he appeared to be weak-minded. It was rather surprising that a timid person like him had been inducted into the Vigilante squad. A man whose mind was filled with the thought of ghosts and who saw stones flying in the air. It was maintained that if they had to perpetuate the reign of the Queen and save their white civilisation from annihilation they must guard themselves against cowards and superstitious fools like 301!

The commandant flared up on reading the report. "Do you call it a medical report?" he said. "Since when have doctors started giving us political reports? They should take care of the wounded. We are there to take care of the white civilisation."

But this dictum was actually made long after when on a dark night Stompi Stipi of the Tumahol habitation had cast the first stone. The immediate cause was something like this: In a house — if a two-room thatched affair can be called a house — Stipi's stepfather had beaten his mother black and blue, the allegation against her being that Stompi had participated in the freedom struggle launched in Soweto. While beating his mother his stepfather had kept repeating, "I too want freedom. I also want equality. But for this it is not necessary to put your life in danger. How much fuel do you put in your oven, tell me? Is it necessary to put all the fuel in the oven all at once? Yes, tell me. And this Stompi of yours, this twelve year-old chit of a child! He had the cheek to go and participate in the demonstrations at Soweto! Just look at him! He had not gone alone. He had also dragged his younger brother along."

Stompi's mother had kept sobbing a long time. Then she got up to serve the food and called out to both her sons. But Stompi was

in no mood to eat. Except for the sound of the rattling of utensils no other sound was heard in the first quarter of that night.

It was a dark night which had put on a dreadful garb after his mother's beating. The bushes and clusters of trees were panting like tired elephants in the dark. Just then Mariam Makabe's voice rang out from the cafe in the market place. The notes of her song came floating over the untrammelled, carefree breeze. Someone had put a coin in the slot of the juke box. Stompi Stipi was fond of Mariam Makabe, particularly the timbre of her voice and the song that she sang. Whenever a boy, holding a coin in his hand stood there undecided, trying to make a choice, Stompi would request him to play Mariam Makabe's disc. He himself could not spare any money for this luxury and looked to others to regale him with music. Enthralled, he would dance to Mariam's song and people in the cafe also listened to her in rapt attention. And sometimes they also joined in the dancing.

That night when the sound of the song emerging from the cafe fell on Stompi's ears, he quietly slipped out of his house and proceeded towards the market place. The song was luring him there. Though he had lived in a different locality of Tumahol he knew the way to the market place and could go there blindfolded. He was five years old when his father had died and after that his mother had married a second time and he had moved to this locality with his mother.

There were seven or eight people sitting in the cafe of whom he could easily recognise two. He had seen them in the initial stages of the Soweto rebellion. He had strayed there just by chance when he was too young even to understand the meaning of the word rebellion. He had seen that there was a big crowd on one side and some people on the other side. The crowd had kept swelling on the Main Street where most of the shops were closed and those that were open were swiftly putting down their shutters. Coming out of their houses, like a river in spate, people were going in hordes towards the Main Street. The Vigilante squads were standing there like hunters, their guns on the ready. Stompi had now begun to get the

hang of things. His stepfather used to talk about these squads in an awed voice. After beating his mother he would himself start weeping, explaining to her that he was beating her out of fear. He said it was a phantom of fear stirring in his heart which provoked him to beat her.

"Are you afraid of mines?" Stompi's mother asked him.

"No, what's there to be afraid of? A mine is not a bad place. But I get scared when emerging from a mine I hear abuses and the thud of boots."

"Who hurls these abuses on you?" Stompi's mother asked her husband. "The contractor?"

"No, the contractor is not a bad sort. He pays us wages and says nice words. If we can cut twenty-five trolley loads in a day he sits with us and entertains us with coffee. It's the Vigilantes who abuse us."

"But your contractor is a white man, isn't he?"

"How does it matter? All white men are not wicked or work-shy. Our contractor takes work from us and he knows how to keep us happy."

"Why do these soldiers abuse you?"

"They suspect that we harbour rebels in the mines."

"But you have labour identity cards. Don't these soldiers know who you are?"

"They identify us only from our numbers. If we don't speak out our number promptly or fumble with our reply the boots of these gum-chewing Vigilantes land on our body and heads squarely."

"Speak in a low voice. Is it necessary to tell where the shoe lands? You must be careful. The children are still awake."

"What did you say?" the father growled.

"I say speak in a low voice."

"Bastard! So, you also dare me — asking me to speak in a low voice! I'll kick you in your . . . there . . . in the place where they had kicked me."

And father had kicked mother once, twice and then a third time. She had shrieked and had started groaning. At this Stompi's stepfather had also burst into tears and had tried to console her . . . after a while mother had got up and served the food — crab soup

and barley bread which she had bought from the baker's shop three days ago.

Stompi was good at catching crabs. If the wind was not blowing, his footprints would remain unobliterated on the sand for sometime. In any case, he could easily see the holes in which the crabs disappeared by bending sideways. They were not black like sea-crabs, but brown like the sand. Sometimes if one dug deep into these holes one would find large colonies of crabs burrowing in the subterranean region. Terrified, they would run helter-skelter, trying to make a bid for escape. Some were caught, others burrowed deep into the sand and escaped.

Their meal over, father had laid mother down on her back and holding her legs apart, he had kept fomenting the spot where he had kicked her. He had also put a hot compress at the place where a Vigilante had kicked him.

In order to obtain sufficient heat his father had raised the wick of the lamp as a result of which its glass chimney had got cracked. His mother had cursed father for it. With proper care she could get rid of the pain but how would she get the chimney replaced?

Under the long flame the chimney had turned black, like the colour of mother's skin but the place where it had cracked was looking shiny like the razor's edge.

The next morning Stompi had gone to the mining area without having a word with his father. He had kept hovering around the area without venturing near the pits, lacking the courage to do so. The areas of the various mines had been demarcated by constructing walls around them or with barbed wires. The new workers had assembled outside the gate in the hope of being recruited. They stood there expectantly armed with their citizen passes while the sentries at the gate glared at them and tried to hold them back.

At last Stompi climbed up a nearby high mound from where he surveyed the scene. The pit mouths were looking like small holes in which the miners descended to get into the mines and suddenly

disappeared from sight like crabs burrowing into their holes. The trolleys loaded with sandstone would come up after a long gap of time, leaving the workers hidden in the bowels of the earth like crabs.

But that day in Soweto, Stompi had seen people congregated over the ground on the Main Street. It had made him vaguely aware of what was lurking behind the minds of those people, and had brought him closer to his stepfather, creating a sense of oneness with him.

And then his eyes had roved over the contingent of Vigilantes. He had run up and stood at the head of the crowd. Following his example, some other children, curious to know what was going on there, had also forged ahead together and stopped in front of the crowd, facing the Vigilante squad.

From the crowd, the voice of the rebel leader rung out in the air, "Push the children back! Why they have to be here?"

"Let them stay where they are," an elderly compatriot shouted from the crowd. "These small boys are more courageous than us. All they have is their future. They have everything to gain, nothing to lose. Our present can make cowards of us but not them. They have only to live with their future."

What happened after that Stompi did not know. He regained his senses only when he found himself in the detention lockup. After the beating, his wounds had been dressed up but his body was still paining in so many places. He remembered the lamp back at home and he saw, as if in a dream, his stepfather applying hot compress on various parts of his body as he had done in the case of his mother. Then he opened his eyes and found the detention ward plunged in darkness. There was no lamp, no flame.

After two months in detention, Stompi was given two resounding slaps and let off. When the jailor of the detention camp came on his round he saw Stompi and the other children. "You idiots, why have you detained minors?" he bellowed at his juniors. "The British law may not hold good in Great Britain but Pretoria regime has still regard for the rule of law and human rights. We can't keep minors

in detention without the court's orders. Release them at once. Otherwise our name will get tarnished. Let them go! Release them! Pay them their travel allowance and pack them off home. . . . Right now! At once!"

That was how Stompi was set free. But little did he know what he was going to do next. Should he go home or stay back? He thought that his younger brother must have already told his parents where he was. . . .

Of course, both his parents were in the know of it — his mother and his stepfather. But both had been hiding this fact from each other. They had been attributing his sudden disappearance to an onset of wanderlust. And that was precisely what they had told the Vigilante squad when it came to enquire about Stompi.

"Yes Sir, his name is Stompi Stipi . . . age, twelve years. He is my stepson and my wife's son. He has been a sort of loafer from his very childhood. He has been indulging in petty larceny — given to stealing things and running away from home. It is only when he is starving that he thinks of his home. We have no idea where he is now. If he returns we shall immediately report you about it and present him before you. He is such a pain in the neck. We are just fed up with him. And, Sir, even without him we are having such a hell of a time."

Those Vigilante blokes were satisfied with this explanation . . . 'these bloody niggers know their past, present and future. We have made them civilised, given them jobs, the church. We have given them their brand of God.'

On returning to Tumahol, the first thing Stompi did was to visit the church. The black padre immediately recognised him and while caressing his head said, "My son, one who is not free in body and soul has really no religion."

Stompi could not catch the meaning of the black padre's remark. He looked at the padre with the same puzzled expression with which he used to watch the Vigilante soldiers.

He came out of the church. In the candle light the padre was looking so complacent and serene. He was smiling.

From far off came Mariam Makabe's voice, floating down from the cafe drawing Stompi's attention to it. Somebody had inserted a coin in the juke box and Mariam Makabe's song had come charging over the air.

Come. Let us love.
Not with the fleeting passion of the body,
Though that too is welcome
But first love the earth,
Love its jungles, streams and its breeze.
So long as the jungle, the mountain, the
wind are not free,
Your body is also not free.
Liberate the transient body.
Come, let us love . . . let us love.

Stompi could not get at the underlying meaning of those words. But the words had a charm of their own and the song its magic. Mariam's resounding voice was a challenge to him.

He had heard the same echo in Mariam Makabe's song in the black padre's sermon and in the thud of the Vigilante's boots. The black padre's words instilled in him hope of freedom and gave him the strength to bear suffering.

But Stompi's stepfather's mind worked differently. Putting his arms around his son he said, "Stompi, my son, I wish I could abide by your wishes. Your wishes are my wishes. But I don't want to lose you. Your mother also doesn't want to lose you. The day you are lost both of us will become strangers to each other, your mother and we can't bear your getting lost to us. And . . . and . . . your ending up in death. You are in the vanguard of the children's liberation force. But. . ."

Nobody had the answer to that 'but.' Stompi asked his father, "But. . .?"

"But . . . but what I want is that you should remain in the rear of this rebellion . . . this movement. You are only twelve years old. A

long life lies ahead of you in which you can accomplish much. So why this hurry?"

"So you want me to become static at this age, without allowing the years to roll by? They also don't want me to march forward in my age. They want to seal my age. . ."

"Stompi, you're talking beyond your years," Stompi's stepfather cried.

"Those who suffer tyranny and injustice do not take their years into account. They bear the same age irrespective of their years," Stompi said with the wisdom that comes naturally with tradition. "I don't know much," he added, but when you beat mother I know where that beating comes from."

It was the same dark and dreadful night when the boots of the Vigilante were falling with heavy thuds on the carpet of sand and sometimes struck against the frog-like slabs of stone.

How these squatting frogs had started flying was a mystery which the roving Vigilante squad had failed to unravel.

At that time Stompi was regaling himself to Mariam Makabe's song when a man came running and whispered in the cafe proprietor's ear, "Put out the light. They are coming!"

The light was immediately switched off and some people slipped out of the cafe under cover of darkness. A faint light was still coming out of the juke box. It was also put out and the song coming from the box suddenly petered out.

Stompi was at a loss as to what to do. He sat down on a bench in the dark. Just then a small unit of Vigilantes came in. They were holding torch lights generally used in the mines. They flashed the lights on the people inside the cafe as if they were searching for crabs in the mines. In a hurry they had failed to spot out Stompi who was sitting outside on a bench. But they had been able to lay their hands on the proprietor of the Cafe. They had beaten him mercilessly. They had cut off the electric wires, broken all the utensils and wrecked the juke box.

They were returning after doing their handiwork when a stone came flying through the air. More stones flew. Cadet 301 started bleeding at his temple. His one eye was swollen.

They had complete information in their possession. After depositing Cadet 301 at the police check-post they came to Stompi's house.

They woke up his father and mother by kicking at the door with their heavy boots. The younger brother had slunk away in the dark. One of the Vigilantes broke away from the rest and barked, "Produce Stompi before us!"

Seeing the familiar torch in the man's hand Stompi's father thought that it must be the contractor of the mine. But a contractor never ever came at such an odd hour. So, he was in for trouble.

"Stompi is not at home," the father said. "He did not come for his food either. I don't know what he does and where he wanders. He has become a vagabond."

"He is not only a vagabond but dangerous too. He has taught fifteen hundred children how to aim stones at us!" It was the man in command of the Vigilantes speaking.

"It's a childhood habit," Stompi's mother who was standing behind her husband said in a subdued voice. "When still a small child he used to pelt stones at frogs. In those days also he was very naughty and was upto all sorts of innocent tricks."

"Now he has become a thorough rascal," the man said. "The devil! Hand him over to us as soon as he comes home. And you! You report at the picket post every day. In the evening."

The Vigilantes left after giving the instructions.

But from that day Stompi did not show up. Sometimes his mother would cry. Didn't he ever remember his mother? His stepfather was also penitent. "He could visit us on the sly," he would say.

But nothing of the sort happened. Only what was expected under such circumstances happened. That night was also dark. The terror produced by the sound of the Vigilante's boots had increased. And then there was firing behind the cottage-like church. The black

padre had come out terror-stricken. The habitation of Tumahol lay under a pall of silence.

Gravely injured, Stompi lay writhing on a blood-drenched grey bedsheet of sand.

Shaking with fear, the old church teacher had come out holding a candle and had shrieked in terror on seeing him. Oh, it was Stompi of all persons. Why had they killed this innocent child?

The padre's mournful face bore signs of prayer.

Squatting down by Stompi's side the old woman teacher said to the padre, "Inform Stompi's people. He is not going to live beyond five or seven minutes."

"No, don't inform anybody," Stompi suddenly opened his eyes and groaned. The padre had come with holy water.

"Yes, we must inform them," the padre said.

"No," Stompi had said in a broken voice. "When my mother hears it she will cry. Don't tell her that I'm dying. Only tell her that I'm under detention, that those Vigilante people have put me under arrest."

"My son. . ." There were tears in the padre's eyes.

"Quietly bury me somewhere. But don't tell my mother, my father. Only tell them that I'm under detention. Then they will not weep for me. They will wait for me."

"Yes, son, Jesus Christ had also said the same — I'll come again on this earth in a man's garb. Wait for me."

"I'm not waiting for Jesus Christ, father. . ." Stompi's eyes had become glazed.

The old woman teacher came near and had a closer look at Stompi under the flickering light and then sank down by his side, mumbling under her breath.

The black padre made a sigh of the cross in the dark.

Stompi was lying on the blood-drenched bedsheet of sand.

Before closing his eyes, as the padre bent down to peer into his eyes, the old woman teacher brought the candle nearer. Then she mumbled under her breath, "Whom was he waiting for?"

"I don't know."

THOSE HALCYON DAYS

Really, such good days had never before fallen to his lot. It would have been hard for the people if there had been no bones godown in their vicinity. Now everything looked so nice. These three or four villages around and the withered meadows between them and so many relatives living within hailing distance. The river flowing by about three miles away and the barren and deserted landscape studded with mounds, some high, some low, skirted by the village road which joined the main highway where trucks broke journey for the night at a wayside halting point. The bones godown was situated about a mile to the left of the halting point and beyond it, about three miles away stood the railway station.

If there were not a plethora of relatives and herds of cattle in these four villages they would have surely felt that something was amiss. They would have felt a similar loss if there were no sugar mill on the outskirts of the city twenty miles away. And it would have struck a discordant note if the road had not passed through those barren undulating mounds.

Without his younger sister, Kamli, in the house, he would not have been able to carry on even for a day. If trucks had not passed through that arid land it would have made the going hard. And if the truck driver, Banta Singh, had not carried away Kamli at night, her life would have gone to pieces.

Perhaps it had all been to the good.

A good thing, in that area, famine conditions persisted for the third consecutive year. Unless there is a draught, people refuse to stir out

of their villages; they just stay put where they are. Those who have land of their own don't mind going out for short spells. But those who have no land don't have a stake anywhere. They sweat it out on others' lands as farm hands and breathe their last in the village when their time is up. Their prospects look so bleak indeed.

Kamli was better off than others. She had had such a lucky deal. But for that she could not have left the village on her own. As for Bala, he did not suffer from any constraints. He was free to venture out to a neighbouring village when the mood caught him or else go to the river bank. If nothing else, he could bide his time in the village school where they taught up to the fifth standard.

Bala would often loiter along the river bank without telling anybody about it. To take anybody into his confidence could land him in trouble. His Granny was sure to reprove him — "Don't go to the river bank. And if at all you go, don't bathe in the river. You must not." While speaking, she would keep turning the bell metal ring on her toe. Perhaps it was a little tight and hurt her toe. At least so his grandfather thought.

Neither of them trusted him. They were sure that once he went to the river bank he would defy them by taking a plunge into the water. How could he stand on the bank and not take a dip even though he was afraid of getting into the water? On top of the admonition, Granny would foist a lie on him. Water has no colour, she would remind him.

But Bala would vehemently contradict Granny. "Granny, just listen to me. I've seen it myself — the colour of water. It's red, red like blood."

Grandfather would laugh out loud. "How you talk, boy! Water has no colour," he would repeat. "Stop going to the river. But go if you must, don't bathe in it."

Bala would recall his grandparents' words. It would make him laugh. Perhaps they had nothing else to talk about. As for him, his mind was full of so many ideas. A glut of them.

This year the winter was very severe. This blighted cold! From whichever side the quilt lifted, the cold would rush in through the

aperture and hit Bala's body like Arjun's arrow. Kamli would laugh. She was having such a good time. She did not drink herself but she saved a few drops from the driver's bottle for Bala. What more did he want?

That bloody cleaner was so noisy and upto all sorts of tricks. He wouldn't sleep himself nor let others sleep. He would strike a match again and again to light up his *biri*, cough and tug at her quilt. Oh, you rotter! If you are feeling so cold why don't you build up a fire with mobile oil and warm yourself with it? The rascal had driven away her sleep. What a nice place the *serai* (inn) was to sleep in. When Kamli was there all the truck drivers rushed through many halting points just to spend the night there.

The owner of the *serai* had rigged up all sorts of facilities to make the drivers' stay comfortable. It had a big compound to facilitate the parking of trucks and additional space outside the compound to take care of the spillover to the extent of a dozen trucks. In daytime, tables and benches were laid out in the compound which were removed at night to be replaced with cots complete with mattresses and bedsheets. The tired and weary drivers and cleaners could rest there even in daytime. As for the night, the arrangements left nothing to be desired.

You could get a variety of food at the *serai*. If you wanted chicken, you could select your own bird from the hen's enclosure to be cooked according to your taste. There was no shortage of cigarettes and *biris*. And there was the gramophone playing all the time for your entertainment.

While picking your teeth you could amuse yourself with scores of pin-up girls pasted on the walls. There were pictures of gods and goddesses for the religious-minded. If you wanted to hear *gurbani* (Sikh scriptures) you could have their records put on for the asking. There was a wash-board to wash your clothes and a tubewell with an ample supply of water for washing and bathing, complete with clothes lines. For the call of nature you could have free access to the nearby fields.

"Aye, why have you sat up? The morning is still a long way off. Are you feeling cold? *Sala*, why don't you speak? Must you keep puffing

at your *biri*? Oh, how your eyes shine in the glow of the *biri*! Like a dog's. Like Lakkhan cleaner's."

A dog is a noble animal indeed.

It does not desert you even in a famine. It dies while digging its teeth in a corpse rotting in a barren field. A vulture has such keen eyes. Unless four or five snarling dogs go at it together it is well-nigh impossible to push it off the dead body.

"What has brought you here?" Lakkhan asked.

"First you finish your *biri*. And stop coughing. Then I'll tell you," Bala said.

"All right. Now go ahead."

"All right, then listen. But why don't you sleep? Well, listen. You know Kamli — the girl, who's my sister? One evening..."

"Really!" Lakkhan's mind got stuck in Kamli's name.

"*Arre*, what else?"

"Kamli is a good girl. Smart and intelligent. The driver is talking of her all the time, even when he is staying elsewhere. One night when his truck broke down he decided to make the entire distance on foot. You mean you would walk down ten kilometres? Why not take a lift in a truck going in his direction and return in the morning? I told him I would take care of his truck in his absence. It was loaded with goods. It was a responsible job. In the end he decided not to go."

"Well, listen..." Bala said. "This sack is smelling awfully. First let me remove it from here."

"What does it contain?" Lakkhan cleaner asked.

"Bloody bones — that's what it contains."

The fact did not register on Lakkhan cleaner's mind. He kept smoking his *biri* and coughing. He was feeling too cold to make the exertion of moving from there. Despite the smell he stuck to the place. The *biri* smoke suppressed some of the smell. Then the cleaner threw away the *biri* and started dozing. Kamli's story was left unfinished. But who cared. Let the fellow sleep.

On getting up in the morning, Bala plucked a twig from an acacia tree and crushing it into a toothbrush cleaned his teeth with it.

Lakkhan was still sleeping peacefully. He was in no hurry to get ready for the day's work. A driver stirred under his quilt like a massive bear. Getting up, he tightly folded his *tehmet* round his waist and holding his arms against his chest he set out towards the fields to answer the call of nature.

Lakkhan's driver, Banta Singh, who had got up early, was returning from the fields. Curled up like a bundle, Kamli was still sleeping under the shed, Banta Singh's turban coiled round a leg of her cot like a python. Apparently in a hurry, Bala was seen proceeding in the direction of the bones godown, the sack resting on his back. Oh, how the sack smelled! But he had to put up with the smell. Bones fetched him good money at the rate of one and a quarter rupees per sack. He managed to earn six rupees per day from these bones. Not bad going at all. In these hard times few people could make so much money. Besides, Kamli also managed to earn five or six rupees per day.

Good that the sugar mill's working season had started and along with it the bones godown had also started doing business. They required nitro to impart whiteness to the sugar grain of which bones were a good source.

Throwing his sack on a pan of the weighing scale, Bala looked around and called out for Chandu, adding a filthy abuse to his name... Oh, this bitchy cold! He shuddered.

Chandu was nowhere to be seen. Then he saw him coming from between the heaps of bones, looking more a skeleton than a man. Emerging from the godown, he bared his teeth in a smile. "*Sala*, why so early?" he asked.

"I was late last evening."

"How's Kamli?"

Bala caught Chandu's meaning. Like a sharp scantling of wood her name must be pricking his mind. Otherwise it was none of his business to enquire about her. Putting a weight on a pan of the scale, Chandu said, "If only these days had come earlier we would not have been reduced from three to two."

Perhaps Chandu had a point there. But at that time this business had not picked up and Bala had to put off Chandu. "Look,

Chandu," he had said justifying his stand, "forget about Kamli. How can you feed three mouths when there's barely enough for two?"

"I wish the famine had set in earlier. Then this bones business would have flourished and there would have been no such problem."

Bala was still mulling over the question when Chandu weighed the sack and pushed it off the pan. He seemed to be kindly disposed towards Bala. "There is a graveyard three miles towards the north dating back to the British times," he said in a whisper to Bala. "People have pilfered the headstones of the graves but the bones are still there embedded in the ground. You may dig them up and bring them to the godown."

"Are the bones good for nitro?" Bala asked.

"These days you get only adulterated stuff. We shall adulterate the bones also." Chandu winked at Bala.

"*Sala!*" Bala abused Chandu under his breath. If he wanted to, he could oblige him by giving him five rupees where only one was due. But he knew he would do nothing of the sort. He would try to please him with sweet words and nothing more. Bala quietly pocketed the money and went his way.

What Chandu had told Bala about the graveyard had come true. But being old the bones were badly corroded. All the same the discovery was skin to chancing upon a coal mine. Wherever he dug, he came upon bones. If he could only hit upon two or three more such 'mines' it would change the very course of his life. A good man, this Chandu.

But the deposit of bones was soon exhausted and Bala's business petered out.

It was only when the famine continued into the third year that Bala woke up to the grim realities of the situation. He realized how precious the bones of his relatives could be and the bones of their cattle. People fought for bones — a regular war of the epic grandeur of the Mahabharata. People would keep vigil — they are the bones

of our relatives, they would claim. They were their animal's bones. The marauders must keep their hands off them.

Bala had fought it out defiantly from village to village to uphold his right over the bones of his relatives and their cattle.

It was during those days that his grandparents passed away within eight days of each other followed by his father twenty-seven days later. His mother had died eight years before. Bala's father wanted to cremate the old man but Bala had vehemently opposed the suggestion; he wouldn't let them burn his grandfather's body.

"What shall we get by burning his dead body?" he had roared at his father.

In reply, his father had shouted back at him, "You mean fellow; so you want to make money even out of his bones? A curse on such progeny! One should die childless than have such a son."

Bala's father kept seething with anger. But could Bala have seen such good days if he had toed the line according to his father's dictates. They had nothing to eat and nothing to fall back on. What were they living for? All around him the earth lay scorched and barren.

He had decided that if he buried his grandfather's dead body under the scorched earth the bones would come out clean. The dogs and the vultures would have taken their own time in denuding the bones of their flesh. What was worse, they would have dragged the dead body here and there with reckless abandon. Lest somebody should decamp with the body at night, he had put Kamli to keep guard over the dead body. It was here that Banta Singh had carried her away from the roadside that night while she was keeping vigil over the dead body.

Perhaps it was all to the good that things had come to such a pass. When good days come they come in droves. Learning that Kamli was in the truck driver's *serai*, Bala had gone to look her up there. His father was still living but physically so decrepit that he was in no condition to visit her. He was slowly dying of hunger and had lost the fight to keep body and soul together. Besides, he was living too far away in the interior, inaccessible to government aid.

It was like a canal whose tributaries dry up before reaching the remote fields.

Then the inevitable happened. His father died. He had to die.

First it was Bala's grandfather, then his grandmother and after that it was his own father's turn to die. His other relatives and their cattle were also perishing fast.

It had happened when his father was still alive. Perhaps it had happened a day before his death.

Fighting his way through pariah dogs and vultures, Bala was collecting the bones of dead bodies by warding off these despicable creatures who would drag the dead bodies far out of his reach.

Kamli had strayed there in search of him and had at last found him crouching amidst the vultures looking for denuded bones.

When he had gone to bury his grandmother under the scorched earth, Kamli had said to him, "Remove the silver ring from Granny too before burying her."

"It's not silver — only bell metal," Bala had said after examining the ring.

Kamli was a simple, ignorant girl and had taken her brother at his word.

It was all due to the sugar mill and Banta Singh. Without them would she have seen such good days? And have had such comfortable and good time in the *serai*? Lucky for Bala that he had had a brain wave to dig the earth for bones.

It was foolhardy of Chandu to have fallen for Kamli. Even now her thought constantly occupied his mind without realising that he lacked the means of giving her what she got from others. Her way of life would not have changed one bit; she would be doing just what she was doing these days. Only she would become a financial drag on him for nothing.

His mind occupied with such thoughts, Bala proceeded towards the bone dumps. He kept so busy for the next seven or eight days that he didn't have a moment's respite. Filling sack after sack with bones he made constant trips to the godown. Chandu would weigh

the sacks and throw hints about Kamli on the sly. But he did not give Bala any concession by occasionally tipping the scale in his favour and paying him something extra. The mean fellow!

He had returned from the bone dumps after eight days. It was night. Kamli was busy. Pulling a quilt over his body he lay down to sleep. The sack of bones near his cot was giving out such foul smell. Kamli made some faint noises.

Coming closer, Bala asked her, "Who's he?"

"Lala — the village shopkeeper," Kamli replied.

"Touch the rogue's pocket for ten rupees, nothing less." Bala returned to his cot.

The place became quiet after a while. In the beginning the Lala would become very demonstrative and make a nuisance of himself. But he would soon quieten down. As for the drivers, they created a racket all night. It was so tiring for Kamli. The next day she would spend the whole time sleeping.

Kamli fell asleep but he could not sleep. Maybe it was the sack of bones. He was feeling so distraught and kept remembering his grandmother.

It had been an intensely cold day. In the morning he had gone to the mound near the village, located in an arid waste and had dug out his grandmother's bones.

Kamli had slept through the night but the night had hung heavy on him. The trucks had kept hurtling past the road, some of them stopping at the *serai*.

A bitter cold and a piercing wind, sharp like Arjun's arrow. Even the neem tree seemed to be whimpering. The darkness was so dense that it defied one's courage to get up. Bala felt like waking up Kamli and telling her, "Kamli, our grandmother's bones are packed in this sack. They are letting out such a powerful stench that it has become difficult for me to sleep."

But Kamli was sleeping in a state of physical exhaustion, the Lala sprawled asleep by her side.

Closing his eyes, he made another attempt to sleep. He had just fallen asleep, when a driver bawled out, "*Ohe, Dina, get up! Time to go.*"

In a state of semi-wakefulness, Dina had left his cot and had sat down half-reclined on the icy-cold driver's seat. Then the engine had roared and the truck had ponderously lurched forward like an elephant and taking the road disappeared in the fog.

Wrapping the quilt tightly round his body, Bala had sat up and peered into the fog on the road. Stillness reigned over the place. Even the cocks were lying huddled together in their enclosures. Some mauve coloured flowers strung together into a garland were shivering on the petrol pump. The wind hissed, the trees shuddered and the grass in the maidan in front stood stiffly erect like hair on a frightened body.

Bala again lay down on the cot and tried to sleep but sleep still eluded him. "Granny, don't be angry with me," he moaned. "If only you had lived in these times you would have died in peace. Kamli's life has been spared and so is mine. My business has got going. If famine had not struck our region, carrying away so many lives and cattle, we would have also met the same fate as theirs. This bones godown has been a veritable boon. Chandu has got a job here. Granny, Kamli has also become wise. She had asked me to tell Chandu not to hanker after her. She said, 'If I set up home with him I would have to build a hut right outside the same village. If the well dries up I'll have to run back to the same place to beg the village Brahmin and the Thakur for each *lota* of water and make proper recompense for it.' Not that they will give the water free. The famine takes its toll of only people like us. The others horde grain to last them for years. They don't lack water either. They don't ask me, 'What's your caste?' Necessity drives them to me. If they stop coming tomorrow I can fend for myself by cleaning utensils in the *serai*. Such opportunities don't come our way everyday. Tell Chandu it'll be of no avail to run after me. What's the use? As you can see, Granny, Kamli has become worldly wise. Are you listening, Granny?"

When Arjuna's arrows struck again, Bala tightened the quilt round his body. He didn't know when he had sat up again. A truck emerged from a tunnel of fog and disappeared into another tunnel, its rattling sound ringing behind.

Bala rose to his feet to wake up Kamli. But...

The heavy quilt near him stirred. A rustling sound, and then he saw the Lala emerging from under the quilt.

"Keep lying, you!" Kamli said. "It is very cold."

But the Lala must leave while it was still dark. He may spend the night anywhere but he must show up in the village during the day. He put on his woollen cap, wrapped the thick sheet round his body and took the footpath to the village.

Bala kept sitting there as before, his eyes fixed on the sack. Kamli's sleep was disturbed. She had seen Bala from under her quilt. "Bala, are you still awake?" she asked, coming to him.

"I'm not getting any sleep."

"There's still something left in that half-bottle. Go and finish it. And there's still time enough to have a few winks of sleep. Go and sleep." Kamli went back to her cot.

"Listen!" Bala said.

"Yes?"

"Granny wouldn't let me sleep."

"Granny?" Kamli gave him a surprised look.

"Yes, Granny. Her soul is lying in this sack."

"Don't be silly!" Kamli said in a reproving tone.

"Kamli, it was my good luck that I forestalled others. I was the first to reach the burial place and managed to dig out the skeleton in its entirety."

"You talk so confidently as if you know for certain that it was her skeleton." Kamli sat down on his cot, pulling half of the quilt over her body.

"Granny's ring! It's still there on her too."

Without uttering a word, Kamli cast a sharp glance at the sack.

Wearing white quilts, the two petrol pumps were standing mute, their fingers plugged in their ears. Under the shed, the tyres hanging

on bamboo poles were staring at the pumps through their eyeless sockets. The mist curling round the neem trees flanking the road seemed to have sundered their necks like a sharp-edged sword. The tubewell pipe circling the mud wall of the adjacent vault seemed to be caressing its waist with its cold arm. Bala and Kamli were silently watching the scene around from their cot. They were feeling sleepy in the cold which seemed to be raining down on them. In their indolence they seemed to have lost count of time.

Kamli was sitting on the cot, her arms folded around her legs and her chin resting on her drawn-up knees while Bala was half reclining by her side. Just then, far away behind a cloud of thick mist something stirred in the dark sky. Then a bank of cloud, dark and solid like an iron bar suddenly shone like a flame, leaping up from a blazing oven. The iron bar suddenly turned cold, leaving a streak of light at its edges, though the oven was incessantly blazing, its bellows working overtime, making the flames leap higher. Gradually the edges of the iron bar started turning yellow and in several places the lips of the clouds turned blue. As if soaked up by the fire, the mist slowly started dissipating and the headless neem trees flanking the road regained their heads. It was as if some nomad blacksmiths were camping somewhere in the vicinity.

Bala grimaced and sat up.

"Are you carrying these bones to the godown?" Kamli asked.

"Yes," Bala said in a hard voice.

"Bala, listen, throw them in the river."

Bala frowned. He tried to suppress his feelings. His mind had also been working along the same lines but unable to finally make up his mind, he was still wallowing in uncertainty. Should he consign his grandmother to the river?

"So you agree with me?" Kamli said. "It would have been different if we were having lean times. In that case you could have delivered the bones at the godown."

"Yes," Bala said in a decisive tone. "I'll leave before the sun comes up. The river is quite far. I shall be back by afternoon."

Lifting the sack, Bala crossed the road and entered a field from where a path went in the direction of the river. Kamli watched him going.

Going back to her cot, Kamli curled herself up like a bundle and pulled the quilt over her body. If a woman is in bed with a man, she can lie down peacefully with her legs spread out, immune to the cold because of the bodily heat. But right now she was feeling very sleepy and fell into a profound sleep immediately on lying down in her cot.

She remained oblivious to when the sun came out of the clouds and lost its warmth and when the day gained its full ascendancy and the activities got into their full stride. The dogs were scurrying round the petrol pumps and loitering on the road. There was a flurry of activity at the *serai*. The tables had been washed and laid out, the vegetables were being cut and the oven had been lighted. The truck drivers who had stayed at the *serai* for the night had finished their tea and were ready to resume their onward journey. The tubewell had started working and was making a steady, drowning sound. The boys had already reported at the vulcanizing shed for the day's work. Over it all rose the music of the *japji saheb* from the disc which the Sikh proprietor of the *serai* had put on. The smell of jos sticks permeated the adjoining room.

Kamli was still caught in the clutches of sleep.

When Bala returned she was still sleeping. He shook her and she sat up rubbing her eyes. "Have you done it?" she asked.

Bala's teeth were chattering with cold and Arjun was relentlessly shooting out his arrows.

"Good that it ended the way it did," Kamli said smacking with satisfaction.

"You must be remembering what I used to tell Granny? 'Believe me, Granny' I used to say. 'Are you listening? I've seen it myself. Water's colour is red, red like blood.' But Granny wouldn't agree. She still insisted that water had no colour. So today while throwing her in the water I said, 'Granny, today you can see for yourself.' "

Kamli looked at Bala full in the face and pushed up her bangles over her arms till they jingled. Her face was looking so washed out

and stale, maybe because of last night's sleeplessness. Or it could be the pallor on account of the cold. Inadvertently, her hand went to her face and she rubbed her cheek. Bala saw a drop of dried blood sticking to her swarthy cheek. She felt the spot with her finger. "What happened?" Bala asked. "Did that *sala*, I mean that shopkeeper bit your cheek again?"

"No," Kamli said in a matter-of-fact voice, "He has a gold tooth. It gets embedded in my flesh." Saying this she walked away towards the tubewell to wash her face.

THE HOUSE WITH SIXTEEN ROOFS

Her body decrepit with age . . . and she a burden . . . as much to herself as to others. And the burden being a part of her own self, was neither discardable nor . . . Thirty years. She had been living in that house for thirty years! Ever since her husband died she had her own house though . . . in a small town . . . rented out for just eight rupees a month . . . not enough to support a living... and then there was that old stigma on her name . . . old . . . forty-year old.

"Ghumanlal's."

"You mean the one who conducts Ramlila?"

"Yes."

"Your house is too far from here. And you will have to pass through so many lanes. How will you reach home?"

"No, I must go," Kishnu started crying. Unable to stand his crying Grandma Salima felt defeated. "Kishnu, how can you reach home? There's mischief afoot in the town, don't you know that?"

"Mischief?" Kishnu's eyelids flickered. "But I've done no mischief. If I create trouble in the class, *Mass Sa'b* beats me."

"Oh no! Not that kind of trouble. . ." Grandma Salima was at a loss for words at her inability to tell the child what rioting meant.

By then Najma, resting her head against Salima's thigh, had dozed off. Grandma's leg had started aching. "Oh, you, get up! Whose daughter are you?"

Najma could not comprehend the old woman's question. She was too small for that.

"What?" the girl lisped.

"Your name is Najma, isn't it? What's your father's name?"

"I don't know."

The third girl, Kamli, replied, "She lives next to our house. On the left side."

"Do you know her father's name?"

"No, I don't know his name, Grandma. She's Babban's sister, Grandma. . ."

"These lanes have spawned so many children that one can't even identify them," Grandma remarked. She was worrying over Kishnu's constant crying. "Bad boy, you! Must you keep on crying? Stop it... I say stop it." Grandma gave a gentle blow on his back. "Clean your nose! Clean it. Dirty boy!"

Kishnu got scared. He cleaned his running nose by rubbing his arm against it and quietened down. The marbles in his pocket clinked. He took them out and started counting them.

A sudden rush of noise from outside made Grandma cock her ears. Leaving the children behind she climbed the stairs to the roof. The din was ever increasing. A lot of people had assembled in the mosque just across the lane. Fear was gripping the people with the falling darkness. A tumultuous noise rose from the lane. Hearing the noise, three children in Grandma's house also started shouting to the accompaniment of rattling sounds produced by beating their hands against the tin door. Grandma reproved them from her roof where she had been standing watching the goings on in the lane down below. When the children refused to listen she pelted lumps of earth at them. Missing their mark, they fell in Kharanjey's courtyard and disintegrating like pomegranate seeds they scattered all over the courtyard. The children started laughing loudly.

Grandma's roof was astir with people jumping back and forth from her roof to other roofs.

"Grandma, can you give me a log of wood?" a woman standing on an adjoining roof asked.

"Wood? Do you think my house is a woodstall?" Grandma said in a sharp voice.

"Have you no eyes to see that the woodstall over there is ablaze?" The woman on the adjoining roof retorted in an equally shrill

voice. "Otherwise, why would I have asked you for wood? Wood or no wood, return the flour you had borrowed from me yesterday. My house too is not a flourmill."

The sting went home but Grandma tried to soften it by laughing, *khe . . . khe . . . khe*. "Ramzani, you have a barbed tongue," she said. "I had applied catechu to take out the sting but you dabbed lime over it. Oh, what powerful stench!" Grandma covered her nose with the end of her *orhni* (a head covering of a thin sheet of cloth). She looked so upset. "Can't you smell it, Ramzani? Oh, what a stink!"

They must have burned down somebody's house. Or they must have shoved somebody into Chunna blacksmith's furnace. Everything was possible in such bad times. Nobody would know it or care to find out.

Just then they heard in the distance the wailing and shrieking of women rising above the pervading noise. Smoke spiralled up from behind a tamarind tree and they heard the intermittent sound of firing, staccato and sharp.

The residents of the sixteen houses whose roofs were jutting into each other had come up on the roofs. The children in Grandma's house had again started crying. Grandma hurried down. "Arre, why are you crying?"

"I must go home. If I don't go back to my mother Grandpa will beat me." Kishnu whimpered.

"But how dare you go out in a situation such as this? The police will catch you. And who knows you may get mowed down in the crowd. Listen, just listen, keeping your ears open. What terrible noise!" Grandma tried to impress upon the child the gravity of the situation. But the more she explained the more he whimpered. He kept on repeating like a refrain that he wanted to go home. Go home he must.

"Keep quiet, you smut!" Grandma gave a hard blow on Kishnu's back and he suddenly calmed down. "Sit straight, or I'll tie you against this pillar. Sit straight, do you hear? Dig a hole in the courtyard and play marbles with these companions of yours."

After diverting their minds Grandma opened the door a wee bit and looked into the lane. The lane was deserted. There was not even a pariah dog to be seen around. Nor even a forlorn pup. She cast a glance at the mosque. Darkness was descending from its minaret.

"Hai Allah! I've forgotten the oil!" Grandma suddenly remembered about the ritual oil which she sent to the mosque every Thursday. Closing the door, she returned to the courtyard where the three children were engaged in playing marbles. Grandma went to the dark back room to take out some oil for the mosque. Here was an opportunity for Kishnu. Opening the door he looked out into the lane. He must escape at once. But he was in no mood to leave his marbles behind. He had just come into the courtyard to retrieve his treasure trove when Kamli cried out, "Grandma, Grandma, look, this Kishnu is trying to escape from your house. The police will catch him and shoot him dead. Grandma, am I not right?"

"Yes, you're right." Dilating her eyes, Grandma tried to strike terror in Kishnu's heart. She was holding the pot of oil in her hand.

"I can also shoot the police dead!" Kishnu said in a blustering tone, selecting a big marble from his lot to adjust it into his catapult. Grandma started laughing, spilling a small quantity of oil from the pot which she rubbed into Kamli's hair. Unable to understand what had made Grandma laugh, Najma kept staring at the old woman with a stupified look. Play acting, Grandma made a pretence of rubbing some oil in her hair.

"Aren't you afraid of the police?" Grandma asked Kishnu. His deliberate silence implied that he was mighty afraid of the police.

Once he had seen his uncle being beaten by the police. When Kamli reminded him about it, Kishnu seemed to have vividly recalled the whole episode and a tremor of fear ran through his heart.

"You have nothing to fear, Kishnu," Grandma said in a reassuring tone. "The police has no business to enter my house."

The darkness which was fast descending over the house reminded Grandma of the oil. She suddenly thought of a clever way

out of her predicament. "Kishnu, do you want to go home?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Then be brave and run an errand for me."

"What errand?"

"Deliver this oil at the mosque over there."

"To whom?"

"The *naib* will be there. Here, take the pot." Grandma forced the pot of oil in Kishnu's hand. "Go, I'll be watching. If there's no trouble in the lane, I'll reach you home."

The flap of the tin door opened. Holding the bowl of ritual Thursday oil, Kishnu stepped down into the lane while Grandma stood there, leaning against the half-ajar tin door. Although outwardly calm and composed her heart had started pounding. She heard the sound of heavy footsteps coming from the end of the lane. She quickly glanced in that direction and then turned her gaze towards the mosque which now lay shrouded in darkness... "May these rioters perish," she muttered. Even the abode of Allah was lying in darkness!

The sound of footsteps drew nearer. Grandma saw that after delivering the oil Kishnu was coming out of the mosque. He was only half way down the lane when a patrol duty emerged, as if from nowhere. Firmly clutching the empty bowl Kishnu cried, "Amma!" Then holding his breath, he tried to hide somewhere like a frightened rabbit. Grandma's breath stuck in her throat.

"Oh, boy, where's your home?" the policeman challenged Kishnu in a thick voice. "What are you doing here? Why don't you speak? Where's your home?"

"There!" Tense with fear, Kishnu pointed towards the house in front. "Over there."

Opening the door, Grandma peeped out. "My son, Havildar Babu!" she said in a tremulous voice.

"Then go home!" Holding Kishnu by his shoulder the policeman gave him a mighty push. He crashed against the tin door and the bowl falling from his hand, rolled down in the lane. While

helping the child to rise on his faltering feet Grandma cried, "Oh, my bowl!"

A policeman who was going to kick at the brass bowl for fun, picked it up and handed it to the old woman. "Here, take the bowl and keep this brat indoors," he said in a commanding voice. "Don't you know this place is under curfew?"

Entering the courtyard, Kishnu again started crying. "I want to go to Amma," he wailed. "Amma! *Hai* Amma!"

His crying was taking a heavy toll of Grandma's patience. At last in utter despair she slapped all three children and taking a cue from one another they started crying in unison. Kishnu had a valid reason to cry for he had been roughed up by the police but Najma and Kamli had no reason to cry. It was becoming too much for Grandma. Unable to stand their wanton crying any longer, she opened the door and pushed the three of them into the lane. "Run away! Go home and cry there."

Just then the police made a public announcement, warning the people to stay indoors. Simultaneously, there was the muezzin's call from the mosque, followed by high-pitched slogans, "*Nara-e-takbir! Alla-ho-Akbar!*" From the opposite direction voices came floating from a distance, "*Har, Har, Mahadev! Jai Sri Ram!*"

Sensing the situation, Grandma opened the door and pulled in the three children from outside the door like meek lambs. Overcome by the exertion, she started panting. "Oh, these interlopers!" she said between her breaths. "Who will take these scourges to their homes?"

In the meanwhile the movement on the roofs had increased. The lanes were within the bounds of the curfew but not the roof; they were outside its range. Lantern and small kerosene lamps in hand, people were moving about exchanging news and asking for articles of daily use.

"*Arre*, Ghaur, by any chance is Maqsuduva in your house?"

"I had seen Chandanva playing in the lane. I don't know in whose house he is hiding now."

"Has your son returned from the lathe workshop?"

"Not yet. His workplace is three miles away. And they have clamped curfew over here. How can he return?"

"Auntie, have you some milk to spare? Both my children are feeling famished."

"I can give you some vegetable curry. Want it?"

There was so much turmoil in the lane. But in contrast, the inmates of the roofs of the sixteen houses who had assembled on their roofs did not look much concerned. The lanterns and small kerosene lamps were already there to relieve the gloom. Badru, the grocer's son had come up with a big flash light which had become an object of fun for the children, Kishnu, Kamli and Najma among them. The children's attention concentrated on the flash light; they would eagerly wait for their turn to press its button. The bright beam of the torch would rove over the neem and tamarind trees or lit up the dark lane like a flash of lightening.

The householders had established a line of communication from one end to the other. They had taken refuge in those houses, staying put where they were, on account of the curfew. They knew which areas were in the grip of rioting. Despite the curfew the exchange programme was going through reasonably well. The only difficulty was that the meandering lanes cut across the various houses, making it risky to hop from one roof to another due to the intervening gap. The inmates of the houses with adjoining roofs had long since made it to their own houses.

Putting a ladder against a wall, Girdhari had brought down his son from a roof into the lane and had then quietly slipped into his house with the boy. But there were others who found the going difficult, specially where two or three lanes intersected each other. The constant patrolling by the police had added to the problem. The only consolation was that people could communicate with each other across the lanes by shouting at the top of their voices. It was a matter of great relief that their children, women and other folks, wherever stranded, were in safe hands. At this juncture Badru grocer's son's torch had come in very handy.

Inadvertently, the same flashlight also became a source of trouble. In a playful mood, the grocer's son had flashed the torch

at the far corner of the lane where a member of the police squad was stealthily engaged in reconnoitering the lane like a snake slithering out of its hole. The squad felt that the rioters were trying to gauge its strength and then overrun the police post.

"This boy is going to get all of us killed!" a man said in a menacing tone. But before further harm could be done, the grocer gave his son three slaps and snatched away the flashlight from him.

They promptly blew out the lanterns and the kerosene lamps, many of which had already gone out. Just then they heard a hue and cry coming from the direction of the market place. Through volumes of dark smoke, they saw huge tongues of fire leaping up through the darkness.

"It seems they have set Dhanna Seth's godown on fire!" a man said in alarm.

"Yes, that's where the flames are leaping up."

"Good that the breeze is blowing in the direction of the nullah and not towards our lane," a man said smacking with satisfaction.

The wise people among them who were really looking worried came out with their surmises. "Then these huge heaps of garbage will also get burnt," Dammu quipped, pleased at the turn of events. "Oh, how this garbage stank to the skies!"

"But your shop is also across the nullah," someone reminded Dammu.

"So what? Does stench always blow in one direction only?"

It was a half-dried slushy nullah of highly polluted water which in the course of the past few years had changed into a nullah of garbage. Having absorbed the stagnant water the garbage stank all the more. One could see the nullah from the roof tops which was now ablaze. The fire must have also spread to the piggeries. The pigs were frantically running around directionless. One could hear their terrified grunts coming through the darkness. The dogs around the nullah had also started barking nonstop, adding to the tumult.

Then they heard a medley of gruesome voices, as if people were attacking one another. Bells started ringing in the darkness followed by loud slogans. *Jai Shri Ram! Nara-e-takbir! Allah-ho-Akbar!*

Har, Har, Mahadev! Kill him! Burn him! Don't let him escape! Pull out his entrails! Running feet, clashing lathis, loud reports of exploding bombs, sound of breaking bottles. The atmosphere was filled with shrieks and groans. It was like a raging storm.

A tornado of noise came whirling into the lane followed by a hail of stones at the mosque. The people who had taken shelter in the mosque spilled out like a frenzied mass. To save their own lives or to take others' lives. In the darkness no one could make out as to what was actually happening.

Opening the door, Kishnu made bold to look out at the gruesome scene but Grandma quickly pulled him in and banged shut the door. Kishnu seemed to have shed his fear. He had come to know that word had travelled from one roof to another and his father and mother knew where he was to be found. Under cover of darkness, an exchange of children and others had also taken place among the people assembled on the roof. Kishnu thought now it was only a matter of time when he would be claimed by his parents. In the meanwhile he had been able to chance upon three more of his friends. They were now six, including the little Najma. They were now their usual selves, creating a racket with complete abandon as they used to do while playing down in the lane on other days.

But not so with Grandma. Her heart sank as she heard the mounting noise in the lane. *Hai*, Allah, what was in store for her? The horrendous slogans of *Har, Har Mahadev!* terrified her. In the meanwhile the children had thought of a new game.

As the slogan, *Har, Har Mahadev!* came wafting on the air, the children vociferously responded with *Har, Har Mahadev! Nara-e-Takbir! Allah-ho-Akbar! Dig the grave! Ramchander Ki Jai! Hai Hussain! Hai Hussain!* They started playing Dussehra. Then they changed over to Muharram and soon staged a riot.

All of them had armed themselves with something or the other — Grandma's pair of kitchen tongs, ladel, lathi, bamboo stick, rolling pin. With the devil's diabolical glee they were playing at rioting in the courtyard, matching noise with noise coming from outside and slogan against slogan. They ran chasing each other,

striking the ladel against the rolling pin and the lathi against the bamboo stick. Sitting apart, little Najma applauded their antics by clapping gleefully.

The whole thing was driving Grandma mad, for the children just didn't care to listen to her. The noise inside the house and outside in the lane seemed to have unhinged her mind. The noise outside had momentarily stopped when a child punctuated the silence by banging his spoon against the tin door. Mad with rage, Grandma gave a resounding slap to Najma, who happened to be nearest to her, arresting her clapping midway. Then she fell upon the other children. "You rogues, what's going on here?"

"Run, run!" Rushing through the vestibule, the children ran towards the dark back room.

"You rascals! Are you bent upon taking my life? Come, kill me! Kill me!" Grandma started crying.

The noise receded towards the end of the lane only to change into the staccato sound of the policemen's boots. Giving a violent push to the tin door a policeman barged in. Grandma was still crying.

The policeman fired in the air. Not to talk of the courtyard, half the lane rang with the sound of gunfire. Petrified, the children stood in the dark, holding their breath.

"Come out from your hiding!" the policeman cried. "Unless you want your bodies to be riddled with bullets! Search the place," he asked another policeman who had just walked in. The policeman cautiously proceeded towards the vestibule.

Completely bewildered, Grandma could not understand what was going on. The policeman again fired in the air to strike terror in the hearts of the hiding rioters. Grandma felt as if her ear drums had burst. Putting her hands against her ears she struggled hard to keep herself from fainting.

The policemen were able to lay their hands on the culprits. They were five children and they were crying. The sixth child, Najma, had hid herself under a cot.

The children who were still crying were ordered to line up in the courtyard. The policeman stood facing them.

"So, you were the ones who were making all this racket? The hell you gave us!" The policeman slapped a child who was standing nearest to him. The slap bounced off from his cheek and hit another cheek.

The gunman came into the lane, the other policeman in tow.

"Ma, close the door tightly," he said kicking viciously at the hanging tin door. "The riot is still in full swing."

THE BLUE LAKE

The blue lake is visible from a distance. Behind the grove of trees, the flat plain sharply dips down, as if it has been whisked away and the lake bursts upon one's sight — a broad expanse of water flashing like a mirror between a cluster of tall trees.

"What a beautiful lake — like a diamond studded on the earth," the British District Officer had exclaimed when he came here with a shikar party. "We must have a pucca road down here."

This was thirty years ago.

The work of laying a path upto the lake was immediately taken in hand. Mahesa belonged to the labour gang, recruited from the neighbouring village, to work on the job.

"What a beautiful woman!" Mahesa had said looking at the British District Officer's wife. "And what eyes — blue like the lake!"

The car had got stuck in the mud. Mahesa was the first to run up to the car and apply his shoulder on the side where the memsaheb, the District Officer's wife was sitting. The labourers, ugly, strong, raw-boned, made lewd gestures among themselves. Mahesa, bolder than them all, had felt tempted to put his hand inside the car and touch the voluptuous flower-like tender woman. His companions were enraged at his boldness — the rascal!

At night the labourers sat around improvised hearths, under a tree, cooking their food, their faces shining in the leaping flames.

"We must ask the Mate to kick the rascal out," Bhajnu said, taking out a tobacco pouch from the fold of his dhoti. "Had the memsaheb come to know about it she would have had him flayed. "Sala, he thinks he is a great lover!"

"Let him be," Hori swiftly turned the thick chapati over the fire. He was feeling terribly hungry. "None of our concern," he said with an air of finality.

"Why, we may lose our jobs," a labourer said as he raked the fire.

Under another tree, someone burst into a song, in a rich, coagulated voice: "Oh, white woman, your eyes have cast a spell on me."

The brass thali clanged. The labourers laughed, catcalled and applauded. For a moment they forgot their hunger and their eyes shone with devilish delight. It was Mahesa dancing. In the glow of the hearths, the trees, their scaly trunks full of sap, glistened like huge pythons and their leaves shone like copper. Swishing its wings, a crane flew over their heads, shrilly crying.

"Stop now!" the one-eyed Mate cried, "and eat your food like good boys."

The labourers did not like the Mate's indulgent tone. "The rascal has won over the Mate," Bhajnu whispered. "He is a lecher. He loves bawdy songs."

Their hunger had flared up at the smell of horse bean legumes and the sight of thick *chapatis*. They ate and gossiped long into the night. Gradually the fire sank and the dying embers were covered with ash. The darkness thickened around the cluster of trees.

In the morning they had just got down to their work when a party of holiday-makers came upon them. A few Indian sahebs accompanied by pretty looking women. The women had cameras slung over their shoulders. They had pulled up their saris to save them from getting smeared with dust and had tucked the apron-ends in the folds at the waist. Their faces glistened with sweat. The men carried guns with bandoliers of cartridges across their shoulders. It was quite a job to carry the heavy caddies of food. They stopped in front of the labourers and looked about. Sensing their purpose the labourers got absorbed in their work as though they were unaware of the existence of the party. But not Mahesa. Pretending to adjust his waist band, he straightened himself up and looked at them from the corner of his eyes, hoping that one of the

women would request him to carry the caddies for them. He knew the Mate would not object.

One of the women was in a blue sari. He looked at her greedily, hoping to catch her eye. He did not care for the Indian sahebs. But he had decided that if she asked him for help he would throw away his spade and readily accede to her request. He looked at her steadily, as if hypnotised by her beauty.

"Can we get a man around here?" It was the woman in blue sari speaking. Her voice was sweet.

Mahesa did not like the way she had addressed him. If she wanted a labourer, it was no use wasting her breath on him. "We belong to the Government gang," he said haughtily, as if to work for the government was something exalted.

"We want some help," the woman said sweetly. "Just to carry these things to the lake."

"Then say so — that you want help," Mahesa said with a great show of dignity.

The woman was amused at Mahesa flaunting his pride and smiled. He looked bewitched at her white teeth. Then he ran up to have a word with the Mate and hurried back.

He picked up their things. "Let me have that bottle too," he said pointing the thermos which hung from the woman's shoulder.

The woman in the blue ignored him. But Mahesa was not to be outdone so easily. "Are you out for shikar?" he asked her as he walked by her side. "Where are you from?"

The woman in blue did not reply. She was gaily talking to a member of the party. Mahesa felt slighted. Gulping his anger, he walked some distance behind the party. He felt like dumping their gewgaws on the ground and telling them that he was no ordinary labourer that they should ignore him like this. Then he realised that if he went away he would miss the woman in blue. He liked walking behind her.

Soon he got another opportunity to speak to the woman. They had taken a wrong turning. "Don't you know the way?" he said, walking upto the woman in blue. "You people are heading towards the marsh. I'll show you the way. Follow me."

"Oh, the marsh!" the woman in blue was startled. Her perky manner tickled Mahesa. In Kanpur, where he worked in a textile mill, he would hurry to the road-crossing as soon as his shift ended and stare at the passing women. Women fascinated him.

They had reached the grove. Mahesa put the things down on the ground. The women sat down by the lake. A cool breeze was blowing from the direction of the lake and it was pleasant under the shade. The clouds were floating in the lake and the palm trees shivered in the rippling waves. Far off, in the shallow water, one could hear the swans and the water hens fluttering their wings as they searched for moss and shells and crabs. Swallows twittered in the trees.

Suddenly the woman in blue said excitedly, "A water-snake! I can see it swimming in the water."

All of them looked towards the lake. Mahesa gave out a loud laugh. How ignorant these city people were! Couldn't they distinguish between a snake and a serpent bird. "It's not a snake. It's a bird!" he said looking at the woman in blue.

"A bird? Don't be silly. It is not a bird," the woman said coyly.

"Don't you believe me? You'll see soon enough." Mahesa's gaze swept over the lake. "Do you see that tree stump jutting out of the water? There's a bird sitting on the stump. They are companions."

"That black bird?" the woman said.

"Yes," Mahesa replied. "The snake-bird is fond of swimming. It keeps its beak above the water like the point of a spear."

"What does it eat?"

"Fish," Mahesa's eyes shone. "When tired, the bird will sit on the stump and spread out its tail and wings to dry."

"Will it come out soon?" Her mouth fell open in surprise.

Her teeth were white, like the wings of a swan. Mahesa looked at them fascinated.

The woman's gaze was fastened on one of the men who had picked up a gun. Mahesa looked at the gun in dismay. He was given some money, and he left, forgetting the attraction of the place. He felt heavy at heart; his ears were filled with the sound of the birds, and the point of the gun pricked his mind. He could make out the

sound of each bird, of those who inhabited the lake all the year round, and of others, the short time visitors, who migrated from the hills during the winter months. He understood the meaning of their sounds — their querulous shrieks, their love calls, their warning signals, cautioning the companions of the lurking danger. As the birds — the drakes, jays, water fowls, cranes, storks and others capered by the lake, or skimmed over its surface, he could recognise them by the sound of their flapping wings. He shuddered at the thought of the gun.

A gun fired. Its dying sound reverberated in the sky. And then a distressed babble of sounds filled the air. It hurt Mahesa. He felt sad. In the distance he could see his companions busy at work. He stopped and looked back. The marsh was silent, but above him there were frightened birds wheeling in the sky, letting out frenzied screams. He swiftly walked back to his place of work.

At night when the hearths were lighted under the trees, Mahesa was not there. "He doesn't care for our simple food" said Charan Singh, who had brought spices and onions from the village. "Tonight the swine will help himself to *chapatis* smeared with ghee."

"Where? Is he in the village?" Bhajnu looked up in surprise.

"At *Punditain's* house, where else?" Charan Singh said. "I saw him gossiping with her outside her house. And that accursed wench, decked in jewellery and her hair curled up was giving him big smiles. *Sala*, he's doomed." Charan Singh spat and skinning an onion started eating.

"How did she become friendly with him?" Bhajnu asked kneading the flour in the iron trough.

"Why, she's game for everyone," Charan Singh said. "There was a time when she was hot on me. I shrugged her off. Who would care to jump into an inferno?"

"Perhaps she would have proposed to you hadn't you been a hunch-back," Hori jibed at Charan Singh. "Now don't put on airs. The village Thakur was terribly gone on her but she would not even glance at him."

• “She’s proud of her wealth — that’s what she is.” Bhajnu said putting the *chapati* on the hot iron plate. “It’s difficult to find the like of her within ten villages around here. Glorious! What a body! What a woman!”

Charan Singh sighed. In the light of the hearth his back bulged like a pumpkin. The pouch under Hori’s eye was swollen. “An insect has stung me.” He rubbed his eye with his flour-smeared hands. “The *Punditain* eats pure ghee and lives in style.”

“She looks young for her forty years.” Bhajnu said turning the *chapati* on the iron plate. “And how old is Mahesa?”

“Couldn’t be more than twenty-five,” Charan Singh said.

“Well, well...” Hori laughed diabolically.

The work on the road was abandoned and Mahesa parted company with his gang. He had married Parvati, the Brahmin widow. Tongues wagged. Some said the widow had roped in Mahesa because of his robust youthfulness; others, that the widow’s wealth had lured Mahesa into marrying her. Whatever the case, people were critical of the match. That is how the world is made: heads they win, tails you lose. It castigates a man for sowing wild oats, as much as it resents if he turns a new leaf. Mahesa, on his part, was indifferent to what people thought of him. Parvati too, had entered the blissful state of matrimony for the second time after passing through a bleak period of widowhood. She made up for lost time by putting vermilion in the parting of her hair and a dazzling red mark on her forehead, between intricately curled up hair; they enhanced her charm. A woman of stately proportions, when she walked down the lane with a silver girdle round her waist, and her anklets set a-tinkle, the hearts of onlookers missed a beat.

When they went out together, Parvati would sweetly chide Mahesa to walk ahead of her. “You don’t even know the elementary rules of etiquette,” she would say. “Husbands always walk one step ahead of their wives. People would laugh at us.”

Mahesa looking trim in a smart turban would say, “Sweetheart, don’t feel shy. Ladies in the cities always walk by their husbands, arm in arm.” Her glass embroidered jumper which she had bought

in the city, dazzled his eyes. How beautiful she looked. Mahesa felt proud of her.

One day Parvati was applying *mahavar* to her feet before going to worship the goddess when Mahesa dipped his finger in the bowl and smeared her lips with the red paint. He would not allow her to wipe off the paint and held a looking glass before her face. “You should have married a white woman. They know how to make up their faces,” Parvati said blushing with pleasure. She was intoxicated with her own beauty.

Mahesa caught hold of her wrist. “In what way are you inferior to a white woman?” She grinned. Her teeth were white — and Mahesa was suddenly reminded of the snow white plumes of a swan.

At her request, Mahesa had clipped his moustaches short and curled them to a point. He had twisted his tuft into a fine, thick knot, and cultivated side-whiskers. He had bought cotton coverlets for his bullocks and when he visited country fairs he put collars of forty tinklers round their necks and polished their horns. Parvati had prepared a cotton covering for the roof of his light cart to which the tailor had tacked rainbow coloured frills. It was gorgeous, Mahesa’s chariot. Once he had laid a wager in a race and had insisted on Parvati sitting by his side while he ran the race.

“Stop behaving like a spoilt child,” Parvati had said. “People would laugh at me — an old woman?”

Mahesa had laughed. “Stop talking like a granny. Who says you are old? You, who are tender like a colt with all your milk-teeth still intact.”

By the time they reached the common fallow land, Parvati had adroitly prevailed upon him not to participate in the chariot race. He showed her round the country fair and returned home in high spirits.

Parvati and Mahesa had become the talk of the village but they were unconcerned. Parvati dabbled in moneylending and kept everyone under her thumb; all needed money one time or the other and had to have recourse to her. Even those who talked ill of her to her back kowtowed to her.

Mahesa was now without a care in the world, a man about town who had no need to earn a living. But even now, when a shooting party turned up he could not resist the temptation of following them to the lake, specially when it was accompanied by women. He longed to talk to the women and when they took no notice of him, he would start bird-watching, or he would go round the lake, look at the fish eggs, spread like sago granules on the surface of the lake, admire the magpies or with bated breath watch the storks, lost in shrewd contemplation of their catch.

Once he was away from home the whole day and returned late at night. Parvati was annoyed. "Where have you been?" she asked. "Oh, nowhere in particular," Mahesa replied. "I had gone to the lake."

"I see. Do you never tire of the lake?"

"I was watching the partridges. It's great fun seeing them sprawl in the dust."

"You were not at the lake. Now, out with the truth. Where were you all this time? You could see the partridges at Baldu's house. He arranges partridge fights."

"It's no good watching caged partridges. I don't know why people keep birds in cages."

A pack of birds flew across the sky. Mahesa watched them fascinated. "Parvati, look at them," he said excitedly. "They will hunt for fish the whole night."

"I am not interested in your birds," Parvati said. "Come to the point. Where have you been?"

"I've told you."

"Can one believe that you were watching partridges so late in the night?"

"Believe me, Parvati," Mahesa replied. "Don't you see how my feet are bleeding with thorns? Anyway, if you must quarrel, why can't you wait till the morning?" He lay down on the cot and stretched out his legs.

Parvati changed the topic. "I have loaned out too much money," she said. "The debtors are showing no signs of returning it. You must be tough with them."

"It's beyond me to be tough."

"Listen, I have a mind to have a temple built in front of our house. And if possible, a small dharamsala by its side. It will be money well spent in a pious cause."

"Since when have you started thinking of piety?"

"I have been thinking of constructing a temple for a long time. Once I even called in the mason and showed him the land. But nothing came of it. When I am gone the temple will perpetuate my name. People will bless me for it"

"It's no time to think of such things."

"No, I've been thinking of it the whole day."

Mahesa looked intently at Parvati. The rays of the moon were falling on her face. She looked tired and aged. Mahesa realised that there was a great disparity between their ages. A web of blue veins was faintly traced on her face. The flesh on her arms hung loosely and she had started spreading around the hips. But all the same, she looked attractive in her curled up hair.

"Why are you looking at me so?" She pulled the end of her sari over her face.

But Mahesa kept looking at her. "Is it necessary to build a temple," he said when she again asked him the cause of his abrupt silence. But Parvati knew the reason. The fleeting emptiness in his eyes, more eloquent than words, had told her everything. "I know you regret having married me," she said sadly.

"Huh?" Mahesa was not prepared for such a question.

"Today when I thought of it I felt very sad. I've ruined your youth for the sake of my own pleasure." There were tears in Parvati's eyes. "I know you regret having married me. Isn't that true?"

"Oh, no, such thoughts have never crossed my mind," Mahesa shook his head. "Why should I regret our marriage? There's no reason to."

"Have you never thought of it? Not even at the time of our marriage?" Parvati looked at him searchingly. "Till now you have had no responsibilities. It would have been different had we children." Her voice became strained. A cloud had covered the moon and in its dim light Parvati's features became blurred.

Mahesa suddenly realised that after marriage all couples had children whereas he had been denied this benediction. He looked closely at Parvati. He could not understand what weighed on her mind. The house was steeped in stillness. Even when lonely, he had never felt isolated from Parvati. But today she looked so withdrawn.

"What's the matter with you?" Perhaps it was the first time that he had had to tax his mind.

"I wish I knew," Parvati said. "The village hospital is very small. They won't be able to look after me properly."

"Hospital? What have we to do with the hospital?" Mahesa looked at her puzzled.

"What a dim-wit you are. Who'll attend to me in this house? We have no relations who could stand by me in difficult times. I am told, in the hospital they give one some sort of medicine which makes things easy."

"Oh, I see!" Mahesa's face broke into a grin. "I'll take you to the District Hospital. Money can buy the best medical attention. God is kind to us that way."

But Parvati could not share his joy. A vague fear clutched at her heart. "I am terribly scared," she said. "I think I won't survive the ordeal!"

"There's nothing to fear."

"I have bad dreams and my breathing gets laboured." She clutched her arms against her breast.

"I'll tell you what. From now on you sleep in the same cot with me," Mahesa suggested hopefully.

"Don't be silly!"

"I used to wonder why you had been avoiding me. Now I know the reason. Don't imagine things, Parvati. All will be well. Let's pull our cots under the tin roof."

Mahesa put his cot against Parvati's. Resting his head on the frame, he placed his hand over her arm. "Now you won't feel afraid any more."

All those days Mahesa felt lost and forlorn. Parvati was in no condition to accompany him to the lake where they could spend time enjoying the view. He therefore killed time knocking about in

the village or with Hafizee who ran a grocer's shop. He often bought some knick-knack to take home for Parvati — a nail polish, a hand mirror, or some other thing which Hafizee recommended as currently in vogue. One day, Hafizee showed him a photo-frame. But he had no photograph in the house. The third day he prevailed upon Parvati to visit the photographer. He forced her to deck herself in all the jewellery that she possessed and smeared her hair with oil.

When they sat together to pose for the photograph he pulled the end of her sari down to her ears, exposing her full face to the view. He tucked a multi-coloured handkerchief in his pocket and pulled out the amulet from under the shirt letting it hang against his chest. For the backdrop he selected a screen depicting a garden in which two birds sat huddled together with their beaks intertwined. Parvati liked the screen.

The photograph came out alright except for Mahesa's hair which looked white in the photograph.

"The photographer has made me look old. Why did the fellow play this trick on me? My hair is jet black."

"The photograph was your idea," Parvati said, amused. "One rupee gone down the drain."

But Mahesa did not mind his grey head. He had the photograph framed and hung it in the verandah over the alcove. No other house had such a photograph except the village lawyer's.

That day when he returned from Hafizee's shop, he brought a hair pin for Parvati. He was looking at the figure of the English woman printed on the cardboard disc when Parvati asked him if he had settled with the mason for the construction of the temple.

"No, I could not meet the mason. But I have news for you. There's a proposal to bring electricity to our village. The Octroi Office is keen about it. The only snag is that it does not have the funds."

"Then how will the scheme materialize?"

"I learn the Octroi Office is going to raise money by selling off some waste land."

"If that is so, I would like to buy the dumping yard adjacent to our house. We could build a temple on our outer platform and a small *dharamsala* on the dumping yard. You just find out if the news is correct."

"Yes, it's correct. Hafizee often calls at the Octroi Office. It was he who told me about it. We'll buy the land at the first opportunity."

"It may take time."

An angry noise rose from the lake. "Another shooting party, I think!" Mahesa said excitedly. He looked towards the sky in agitation. Ruddy geese flew past in pairs, screaming. Mahesa's heart was filled with pity. "Aren't they magnificent!" he said. "Why kill them?"

"I see too many new birds these days," Parvati said. "It's difficult to recognise them. I wonder where they come from."

"They are visitors," Mahesa said. "They come from the hills during October and are gone by the end of March. I've collected some bird-eggs. I didn't tell you about it. You would have turned me out of the house."

"I could turn you out even now," Parvati laughed.

"I'll show them to you." Mahesa went out and came back with a variety of white, mottled and pale blue eggs.

"Look at these, Parvati," Mahesa said picking up the eggs, one by one. "This is the egg of a ruddy geese, this one, a crane's and this, of a goldfinch's."

Parvati took the goldfinch egg in her hand. She was turning it round when it slipped through her fingers and fell on the ground. A faint cry escaped her lips. Her face clouded with fear. "It's a bad omen." Covering her face she started sobbing.

That day Parvati had wept, weighed under a strange premonition. In the same way she wept piteously in the maternity ward of the District hospital.

Mahesa could recall it vividly. Why is it that a person always weeps in the same way? He could not forget the sound of her weeping when she had called him to her bedside. "The time of delivery is already past," Parvati said. "The lady doctor says she'll

have to perform a caesarean." Parvati shuddered at the thought. Her eyes filled with tears. Firmly gripping Mahesa's arm she said in a piteous tone, "God knows what's in store for me. My life hangs by a thread."

"Don't be down-hearted, Parvati," Mahesa said. "You'll turn the corner. I'll have a temple built and *dharamshala* also."

Parvati did not survive the ordeal. The child died in the womb. After the operation, she became septic and her condition deteriorated. Her body had turned blue.

Mahesa was suddenly reminded of the blue veins on her face as she lay in the moonlight that night. Her breathing had become shallow. Quietly, she beckoned him to her bedside. "The temple. Don't forget the temple. Name it after me."

The temple! Mahesa's heart was torn to shreds. "Don't talk like this, Parvati," he said still clinging to hope. "The child is dead, but you'll live to bear me another."

"Have a close look at me — for the last time. I'll soon be gone". Tears welled up in her eyes and trickling down her ears they fell on the pillow. Her arched, shrivelled lips fell open.

Mahesa's world lay in ruins about him. People said that the shock of Parvati's death had unhinged his mind. Mahesa who had always led a carefree life, was now a changed man. To collect money from his debtors had become an obsession with him. He had become harsh with them.

"Mahes Pandit, why don't you marry again?" people asked. "What good is all this money to you if you don't have an heir to carry on your name?"

"Yes, I'll marry if I come across a woman as good as Parvati," Mahesa said. "Oh, no, forget about it. It was wrong of me to utter these words. Don't pull my leg. I'm too old to marry again."

Mahesa was ten years younger than Parvati. But now he would have looked ten years older than her. Within three years of her death his temples had greyed and the flesh round his neck became flabby and wrinkled. Truly, a man does not grow old by himself; it's the vagaries of time that make him look old.

One day he settled down outside Jagan barber's house warning him that he would not move from his door till he had realised his money, interest and all. "Pandit, you have become so hard-hearted. Have you no regard for other's feelings," the barber's wife said. "Aunt Parvati was not like this. She had a sharp tongue no doubt but she never went so far."

"I am not concerned with what Parvati did. Cough up my money. The full amount!" Defiantly, Mahesa untied the knot of his tuft, and sat down by the door, determined not to leave till he had realised the money.

Jagan barber whined: "Maharaj, I don't have the whole amount. That's the stark fact. Even if I dig the house to its foundations, I won't be able to produce more than twenty-five rupees. Please give me some more time."

Some by-standers intervened. Only then did Mahesa relent.

For some time, Mahesa, who was now known as Mahes Pandey, was not seen in the village. His debtors heaved a sigh of relief. But within fifteen days he was back again. They learnt that he had gone to Mirzapur and Chunar to look for stone for the temple. As for the idol, he had decided to import if from Jaipur.

It was people's guess that Mahesa's liquid assets were anything between eight to ten thousand rupees, without taking into account what he kept hoarded in the ground. His greed had by now reached the point of satiety. "I have nothing to live for now," he told Hafizee one day. "I've only one more responsibility to discharge. To build a temple and a *dharamshala*. Then my mind will be at peace. This was her last wish."

"It's a noble cause," Hafizee said. "When you take the job in hand many will come forward with their mite. Write me down for twenty-five rupees."

"I am short of funds." Mahesa looked glum. "They think I have a mint at home. The cement alone will cost three thousand rupees."

Mahesa was proceeding towards his house when he saw some unfamiliar faces going in the direction of the lake. They belonged

to a shikar party — four men and two women. Before he knew, Mahesa found himself following the party.

Stillness reigned over the blue lake, its edges moist like a wet eye. The long palm leaves trembled in the breeze like the crest of a bird. The young ones of the fish frisked around hyacinths. Bubbles rose to the surface as though the fish were disgorging pearls. Mahesa sat down by the edge of the lake. The cooing of black crested, white breasted birds fell on his ears. He watched them circling in the sky, as if tied by an invisible string, till one of them dived straight like an arrow. When it came up, a silver coloured fish was in its beak.

He heard music. It was the shikar party singing. Their song wafting over the tranquil water of the lake drifted into the void. Mahesa felt at peace with himself.

A flock of swans, cackling excitedly in unison descended at the other end of the lake. A couple of them, breaking away from the flock drifted into the wheat field, and started picking at the tender shoots. They looked around them warily every now and then, as if they were strangers to the place. Mahesa was deeply moved. They were birds of passage who would go away after a few months, like Parvati who had departed after giving him a few years of happiness.

The crane crackled. Proud of its white crest, it walked with a majestic stride, looking for some sandy stretch of land where it could lie in comfort. Suddenly it was startled by a loud noise which went booming in the sky. In the marsh, to his left, a female crane screamed. Its voice, shrill like the sound of a clarinet, kept echoing in the sky.

Bewildered, the male crane rose into the sky and circled over the female crane. Sometimes, descending to the marsh, it walked in circles, in long aimless strides, and screamed. The voice of the fallen female crane had cracked. Its neck writhed like a crushed serpent.

The swans rose from the bank and stalked into the nearby fields. The sylvan atmosphere of a moment ago had become nightmarish.

Mahes Pandey gazed at the faces of the shooting party. He thought that like Parvati's eyes, the eyes of the women, who accompanied the shooting party would be dim with tears. But they

wore a triumphant smile, in admiration of the hunter's marksmanship.

He returned home. In the lonely room, the scream of the dying bird kept haunting his mind, merging with the wail of Parvati, which he had heard when she was passing the last hours of her life in the hospital.

In the morning he could not hold himself back from again visiting the blue lake. The mist was slowly lifting from the lake. A pair of birds was eating moss. He proceeded towards the marsh. The crane was still there, digging its beak into the plumes of the dead bird, hoping to bring it back to life. He sat down under a tree and gazed at the swans, which had flown from far off Mansarovar, tucked in the altitudes of Kailash — the abode of gods. The plumes of gold finches scintillated in the morning sun. Mahes Pandey's heart was filled with sadness. These innocent birds, alien to his part of the land, why should he have any attachment for them?

When a survey party came to the village, people knew that electricity would soon come to the village. Mahes Pandey had heard that a lot of electricity was being generated in the Eastern region. Their village would be linked with one of the grids there.

Things moved fast. One day the village drummer went about proclaiming that some land belonging to the district board would be publicly auctioned on Monday the 4th of January in the compound of the Octroi Office. The site plans were open to inspection at the Office.

The 4th of January was still twenty days away. But the plot of land adjacent to his house had already gripped Mahes's imagination. It was an ideal site for the temple and the *dharamshala*.

He went round canvassing support for his scheme. "The money would be spent in a pious cause," he told them. "I'll contribute the major share. The *dharamshala* will be public property, managed by a trust. If all of you contribute twenty rupees each we can put the scheme through."

He opened an account in the Post Office with three thousand rupees. He went collecting money from house to house, omitting no one right from the local medical practitioner and the cloth

merchant, down to the petty sweetmeat seller. In a matter of days he was able to add another thousand rupees to the fund.

Mahes Pandey rose in public esteem. He had started wearing a saffron coloured turban and carried a staff. The daily exertion had told upon his health; but despite failing health he did not relax in his efforts. As the day of the auction drew nearer he became more and more pensive. His spirits drooped.

In the meantime many shikar parties visited the lake. The sight of soft-feathered lifeless birds dangling on sticks as they were carried away by the hunters made him mad, and he suddenly thought of Parvati. The birds who had descended from the hills, their feathers, white and soft as down. . . And Parvati's white teeth.

On the day of the auction, he got up earlier than usual and feeling low went to the lake to divert his mind. For some time he sat by the lake scattering the moss with his staff and pulling them out. The *nari* creeper was spread in the water like a wire mesh. Shells clung to its knots and its roots trembled like the fins of a fish. He went towards the marsh where *jalmanjri* flowers grew. Entering the marsh he plucked some flowers and made them into a bunch.

A flock of goldfinches, after spending the night by the lake was about to fly away when a bullet whizzed past. A goldfinch tumbled in the air and fell plop into the lake. Its golden feathers were scattered on the water. As the wounded bird struggled to get across to the other side of the lake a red line chased it. The hunters came out of the grove. The bird coming out of the water disappeared behind a bush. Only a solitary feather kept floating on the water.

Mahes Pandey felt empty. He threw away the *jalmanjri* flowers and returned home.

At the auction he did not bid for the plot of land. Instead, he purchased the blue lake. People were stunned. "Has he gone crazy," they asked. "He has tricked us in the name of the temple," they fumed. "He has played dirty with our money!"

Mahes Pandey had no answer. They would not have understood him.

At the end of March the birds migrated to the hills. The lake looked deserted. But Mahes Pandey knew that they would again be back in the beginning of August.

He hung a notice board on the first tree on the path leading to the lake:

"Shooting Strictly Prohibited."

Below it was written:

"By order : Mahes Pandey
Owner of the lake."

NOT BY FLESH ALONE

The lady doctor, after examining her, told her that though she was free from venereal disease she had unmistakable symptoms of incipient consumption. She wrote down a long prescription for her and advised her to take a nourishing diet.

The Municipal Committee had put a ban on indiscriminate prostitution. Those who failed in the medical test were worried. They had been asked to fold up their business and did not know how to fend for themselves. The lucky few, who came through in the test, strutted about saucily, bragging about their high pedigree. The comely ones, whom Ibrahim, the Contractor, had taken under his wing, infiltrated into decent localities of the city. The fellow kept an eye on them, and paid them month by month, at contracted rates, keeping the rest of their earnings for himself.

At her wits end, Jugnu also approached Ibrahim to find her a place somewhere. "Do you think it's that simple?" Ibrahim said curtly. "It's easier to palm off a girl to a bridegroom than to find a place for her. Customers are choosy. They prod and probe each tissue of a girl's body." Then he edged past her hautilly.

His remarks came as a blow to Jugnu. She thought she was still good for many years. The second blow, however, settled it. Shahnaz, the girl in the next balcony waved her hands in the air and said, "Arrr, don't put on airs. The day is soon coming when no one will climb the stairs to your balcony."

The whole lane was scandalised at Shahnaz's ominous prophecy. No one ever fulminated like this even at one's worst enemies. May the visitors have strength in their loins and more money in their pockets.

That evening Fatte came to her with a new man. The man lingered in the door, as if not sure of himself. In khaki trousers and a blue shirt, there was a stubble on his chin and he carried a bag in one hand. Jugnu's searching eyes detected a thin film of dust on his eyebrows and earlobes. She moved away from him and sat down on her cot. But the man kept standing, clutching the bag. She quietly took away the bag from him and put it by the side of the pillow.

But the man still showed no signs of moving. "Take off your shoes," she said impatiently.

When the man removed his shoes, a wave of stench rose from his feet, filling the small room. Many others who visited her stank the same way when they peeled off their clothes, specially Mansu, the grocer, who invariably came to her after eleven. When he had finished he would sit there holding the small of his back, as if he was stone dead. Jugnu had to help him to his feet and he would totter out of the room, scratching his thigh. For that matter, Kanwarjeet, the hotel-keeper, smelled no less and he kept belching loudly, uttering 'au,' 'au,' with every belch.

When Jugnu could not stand the smell of the man's feet she asked him to put on his shoes.

He obeyed without demur and then sat stock-still on the edge of the cot. Jugnu was annoyed. "Do you think you are sitting in your father's drawing room?" she said testily. "Unload yourself and bump off!"

The man felt slighted but he soon regained his composure. "What's your name?" he asked in a faltering voice.

"Jugnu."

"Where do you come from?"

"How does it concern you where I come from?" she said peeved.

"Let's get down to business."

Then like every other person he asked: "Do you like your profession?"

"Yes, don't you?"

She stretched herself on the cot and pulled up her sari, baring a part of her thighs. He also lay down by her side and his hand moved up to her blouse.

"Don't be a pest," she said, hastily pushing away his hand. "Keep your hands off my blouse."

Completely put out, the man lay still by her side and looked at her face. There was a coating of cheap powder on her face, and lines of powder, like white strings, round her neck. Her lips were blotchy, as if blood clung to them in clots and her ear tops stood out like the eyes of a frog. Her hair was smeared with oil. The pillow case was soiled and the bed sheet looked like a crumpled jasmine flower.

Then his eyes roved over the room. In one corner lay a pitcher of water with an enamel mug by its side. There were some rags also in the same corner. By the side of the cot stood a small cupboard, in which lay a broken comb, a cheap nail polish and some hair pins. A few names and addresses were scribbled in pencil on one side of the cupboard. In another corner lay some film song books in a small heap and by their side some tasselled pigtales like coiled serpents. The man's mind was filled with revulsion. To take his mind off what he saw around him he put his hand on Jugnu's thigh. The flesh was rubbery like stale fish and rough like coarse cloth. From her semi-exposed body rose a faint smell of starch.

"You may have all the time in the world, but not I," she said at last. "This is my hour of business. By now I would have ticked off four men." She firmly clutched the man in her arms.

When he got up from the cot, Jugnu, as if in jest, opened his bag. "You seem to carry a lot of money in the bag," she laughed. The man thought she wanted to filch another rupee or two. But the bag contained only a sheaf in loose papers, a newspaper and a loaf of bread.

"Don't forget me, when you visit the lane next time," she said as the man made for the door. "Come up straight to me." The man turned round, and for the first time, closely looked at her.

Whenever Jugnu went out she covered her head properly like a respectable woman. She did not do anything that invited lascivious remarks. They just cast longing looks at her, as all lustful men do, and no more. As she walked, she would look at them from the corner

of her eye, specially at those who had visited her and seemed to have a right over her. Then one day she saw him — the man with the bag. He was standing in the verandah of the first storey of a building, smoking a *bidi*, his elbows resting on the railing. He was wearing the same blue shirt. The shadow of a flag flying over the building trembled over her shoulder.

She stopped under the building to have her *chappal* mended. She didn't look up, but she knew the man had gone inside his room.

He came to her again that night. There was a hint of recognition in his eyes. This time he did not linger in the door but came in and sat down on the cot.

"What sort of job do you do?" she asked him.

"Nothing much," he replied. "I work among labourers."

"We are also labourers," she smiled. "You must take care of us also."

"Aren't you ready yet?"

"I'm not well today," she said in a listless voice.

"What's wrong?"

"I've a backache and my body seems to be going to pieces. I don't know what's gone wrong with me. May I call Tara? She's a nice girl. You'll like her."

He shook his head and after a while rose to go. "I drooped in just to see you," he said. Then he climbed down the dark stairs and was gone.

Jugnu came out and stood in the window. There were not many people in the lane. A few stragglers stood about in small groups. A man broke away from the ground every now and then and climbed up a staircase. Smoke curled up from the chimney of the baker's shop. She looked up at the wreath of curling smoke, thinking all the while that the man would have gone to some other girl. Then she saw him slowly walking through the lane. So he had not gone elsewhere. The thought pleased Jugnu. Turning back from the window, she closed the door and lay down on her cot.

in the city, dazzled his eyes. How beautiful she looked. Mahesa felt proud of her.

One day Parvati was applying *mahavar* to her feet before going to worship the goddess when Mahesa dipped his finger in the bowl and smeared her lips with the red paint. He would not allow her to wipe off the paint and held a looking glass before her face. "You should have married a white woman. They know how to make up their faces," Parvati said blushing with pleasure. She was intoxicated with her own beauty.

Mahesa caught hold of her wrist. "In what way are you inferior to a white woman?" She grinned. Her teeth were white — and Mahesa was suddenly reminded of the snow white plumes of a swan.

At her request, Mahesa had clipped his moustaches short and curled them to a point. He had twisted his tuft into a fine, thick knot, and cultivated side-whiskers. He had bought cotton coverlets for his bullocks and when he visited country fairs he put collars of forty tinklers round their necks and polished their horns. Parvati had prepared a cotton covering for the roof of his light cart to which the tailor had tacked rainbow coloured frills. It was gorgeous, Mahesa's chariot. Once he had laid a wager in a race and had insisted on Parvati sitting by his side while he ran the race.

"Stop behaving like a spoilt child," Parvati had said. "People would laugh at me — an old woman?"

Mahesa had laughed. "Stop talking like a granny. Who says you are old? You, who are tender like a colt with all your milk-teeth still intact."

By the time they reached the common fallow land, Parvati had adroitly prevailed upon him not to participate in the chariot race. He showed her round the country fair and returned home in high spirits.

Parvati and Mahesa had become the talk of the village but they were unconcerned. Parvati dabbled in moneylending and kept everyone under her thumb; all needed money one time or the other and had to have recourse to her. Even those who talked ill of her to her back kowtowed to her.

Maheśa was now without a care in the world, a man about town who had no need to earn a living. But even now, when a shooting party turned up he could not resist the temptation of following them to the lake, specially when it was accompanied by women. He longed to talk to the women and when they took no notice of him, he would start bird-watching, or he would go round the lake, look at the fish eggs, spread like sago granules on the surface of the lake, admire the magpies or with bated breath watch the storks, lost in shrewd contemplation of their catch.

Once he was away from home the whole day and returned late at night. Parvati was annoyed. "Where have you been?" she asked. "Oh, nowhere in particular," Maheśa replied. "I had gone to the lake."

"I see. Do you never tire of the lake?"

"I was watching the partridges. It's great fun seeing them sprawl in the dust."

"You were not at the lake. Now, out with the truth. Where were you all this time? You could see the partridges at Baldu's house. He arranges partridge fights."

"It's no good watching caged partridges. I don't know why people keep birds in cages."

A pack of birds flew across the sky. Maheśa watched them fascinated. "Parvati, look at them," he said excitedly. "They will hunt for fish the whole night."

"I am not interested in your birds," Parvati said. "Come to the point. Where have you been?"

"I've told you."

"Can one believe that you were watching partridges so late in the night?"

"Believe me, Parvati," Maheśa replied. "Don't you see how my feet are bleeding with thorns? Anyway, if you must quarrel, why can't you wait till the morning?" He lay down on the cot and stretched out his legs.

Parvati changed the topic. "I have loaned out too much money," she said. "The debtors are showing no signs of returning it. You must be tough with them."

"It's beyond me to be tough."

"Listen, I have a mind to have a temple built in front of our house. And if possible, a small dharamsala by its side. It will be money well spent in a pious cause."

"Since when have you started thinking of piety?"

"I have been thinking of constructing a temple for a long time. Once I even called in the mason and showed him the land. But nothing came of it. When I am gone the temple will perpetuate my name. People will bless me for it."

"It's no time to think of such things."

"No, I've been thinking of it the whole day."

Maheśa looked intently at Parvati. The rays of the moon were falling on her face. She looked tired and aged. Maheśa realised that there was a great disparity between their ages. A web of blue veins was faintly traced on her face. The flesh on her arms hung loosely and she had started spreading around the hips. But all the same, she looked attractive in her curled up hair.

"Why are you looking at me so?" She pulled the end of her sari over her face.

But Maheśa kept looking at her. "Is it necessary to build a temple," he said when she again asked him the cause of his abrupt silence. But Parvati knew the reason. The fleeting emptiness in his eyes, more eloquent than words, had told her everything. "I know you regret having married me," she said sadly.

"Huh?" Maheśa was not prepared for such a question.

"Today when I thought of it I felt very sad. I've ruined your youth for the sake of my own pleasure." There were tears in Parvati's eyes. "I know you regret having married me. Isn't that true?"

"Oh, no, such thoughts have never crossed my mind," Maheśa shook his head. "Why should I regret our marriage? There's no reason to."

"Have you never thought of it? Not even at the time of our marriage?" Parvati looked at him searchingly. "Till now you have had no responsibilities. It would have been different had we children." Her voice became strained. A cloud had covered the moon and in its dim light Parvati's features became blurred.

Mahesa suddenly realised that after marriage all couples had children whereas he had been denied this benediction. He looked closely at Parvati. He could not understand what weighed on her mind. The house was steeped in stillness. Even when lonely, he had never felt isolated from Parvati. But today she looked so withdrawn.

"What's the matter with you?" Perhaps it was the first time that he had had to tax his mind.

"I wish I knew," Parvati said. "The village hospital is very small. They won't be able to look after me properly."

"Hospital? What have we to do with the hospital?" Mahesa looked at her puzzled.

"What a dim-wit you are. Who'll attend to me in this house? We have no relations who could stand by me in difficult times. I am told, in the hospital they give one some sort of medicine which makes things easy."

"Oh, I see!" Mahesa's face broke into a grin. "I'll take you to the District Hospital. Money can buy the best medical attention. God is kind to us that way."

But Parvati could not share his joy. A vague fear clutched at her heart. "I am terribly scared," she said. "I think I won't survive the ordeal."

"There's nothing to fear."

"I have bad dreams and my breathing gets laboured." She clutched her arms against her breast.

"I'll tell you what. From now on you sleep in the same cot with me," Mahesa suggested hopefully.

"Don't be silly!"

"I used to wonder why you had been avoiding me. Now I know the reason. Don't imagine things, Parvati. All will be well. Let's pull our cots under the tin roof."

Mahesa put his cot against Parvati's. Resting his head on the frame, he placed his hand over her arm. "Now you won't feel afraid any more."

All those days Mahesa felt lost and forlorn. Parvati was in no condition to accompany him to the lake where they could spend time enjoying the view. He therefore killed time knocking about in

the village or with Hafizee who ran a grocer's shop. He often bought some knick-knack to take home for Parvati — a nail polish, a hand mirror, or some other thing which Hafizee recommended as currently in vogue. One day, Hafizee showed him a photo-frame. But he had no photograph in the house. The third day he prevailed upon Parvati to visit the photographer. He forced her to deck herself in all the jewellery that she possessed and smeared her hair with oil.

When they sat together to pose for the photograph he pulled the end of her sari down to her ears, exposing her full face to the view. He tucked a multi-coloured handkerchief in his pocket and pulled out the amulet from under the shirt letting it hang against his chest. For the backdrop he selected a screen depicting a garden in which two birds sat huddled together with their beaks intertwined. Parvati liked the screen.

The photograph came out alright except for Mahesa's hair which looked white in the photograph.

"The photographer has made me look old. Why did the fellow play this trick on me? My hair is jet black."

"The photograph was your idea," Parvati said, amused. "One rupee gone down the drain."

But Mahesa did not mind his grey head. He had the photograph framed and hung it in the verandah over the alcove. No other house had such a photograph except the village lawyer's.

That day when he returned from Hafizee's shop, he brought a hair pin for Parvati. He was looking at the figure of the English woman printed on the cardboard disc when Parvati asked him if he had settled with the mason for the construction of the temple.

"No, I could not meet the mason. But I have news for you. There's a proposal to bring electricity to our village. The Octroi Office is keen about it. The only snag is that it does not have the funds."

"Then how will the scheme materialize?"

"I learn the Octroi Office is going to raise money by selling off some waste land."

"If that is so, I would like to buy the dumping yard adjacent to our house. We could build a temple on our outer platform and a small *dharamsala* on the dumping yard. You just find out if the news is correct."

"Yes, it's correct. Hafizee often calls at the Octroi Office. It was he who told me about it. We'll buy the land at the first opportunity."

"It may take time."

An angry noise rose from the lake. "Another shooting party, I think!" Mahesa said excitedly. He looked towards the sky in agitation. Ruddy geese flew past in pairs, screaming. Mahesa's heart was filled with pity. "Aren't they magnificent!" he said. "Why kill them?"

"I see too many new birds these days," Parvati said. "It's difficult to recognise them. I wonder where they come from."

"They are visitors," Mahesa said. "They come from the hills during October and are gone by the end of March. I've collected some bird-eggs. I didn't tell you about it. You would have turned me out of the house."

"I could turn you out even now," Parvati laughed.

"I'll show them to you." Mahesa went out and came back with a variety of white, mottled and pale blue eggs.

"Look at these, Parvati," Mahesa said picking up the eggs, one by one. "This is the egg of a ruddy geese, this one, a crane's and this, of a goldfinch's."

Parvati took the goldfinch egg in her hand. She was turning it round when it slipped through her fingers and fell on the ground. A faint cry escaped her lips. Her face clouded with fear. "It's a bad omen." Covering her face she started sobbing.

That day Parvati had wept, weighed under a strange premonition. In the same way she wept piteously in the maternity ward of the District hospital.

Mahesa could recall it vividly. Why is it that a person always weeps in the same way? He could not forget the sound of her weeping when she had called him to her bedside. "The time of delivery is already past," Parvati said. "The lady doctor says she'll

have to perform a caesarean." Parvati shuddered at the thought. Her eyes filled with tears. Firmly gripping Mahesa's arm she said in a piteous tone, "God knows what's in store for me. My life hangs by a thread."

"Don't be down-hearted, Parvati," Mahesa said. "You'll turn the corner. I'll have a temple built and *dharamshala* also."

Parvati did not survive the ordeal. The child died in the womb. After the operation, she became septic and her condition deteriorated. Her body had turned blue.

Mahesa was suddenly reminded of the blue veins on her face as she lay in the moonlight that night. Her breathing had become shallow. Quietly, she beckoned him to her bedside. "The temple. Don't forget the temple. Name it after me."

The temple! Mahesa's heart was torn to shreds. "Don't talk like this, Parvati," he said still clinging to hope. "The child is dead, but you'll live to bear me another."

"Have a close look at me — for the last time. I'll soon be gone". Tears welled up in her eyes and trickling down her ears they fell on the pillow. Her arched, shrivelled lips fell open.

Mahesa's world lay in ruins about him. People said that the shock of Parvati's death had unhinged his mind. Mahesa who had always led a carefree life, was now a changed man. To collect money from his debtors had become an obsession with him. He had become harsh with them.

"Mahes Pandit, why don't you marry again?" people asked. "What good is all this money to you if you don't have an heir to carry on your name?"

"Yes, I'll marry if I come across a woman as good as Parvati," Mahesa said. "Oh, no, forget about it. It was wrong of me to utter these words. Don't pull my leg. I'm too old to marry again."

Mahesa was ten years younger than Parvati. But now he would have looked ten years older than her. Within three years of her death his temples had greyed and the flesh round his neck became flabby and wrinkled. Truly, a man does not grow old by himself; it's the vagaries of time that make him look old.

One day he settled down outside Jagan barber's house warning him that he would not move from his door till he had realised his money, interest and all. "Pandit, you have become so hard-hearted. Have you no regard for other's feelings," the barber's wife said. "Aunt Parvati was not like this. She had a sharp tongue no doubt but she never went so far."

"I am not concerned with what Parvati did. Cough up my money. The full amount!" Defiantly, Mahesa untied the knot of his tuft, and sat down by the door, determined not to leave till he had realised the money.

Jagan barber whined: "Maharaj, I don't have the whole amount. That's the stark fact. Even if I dig the house to its foundations, I won't be able to produce more than twenty-five rupees. Please give me some more time."

Some by-standers intervened. Only then did Mahesa relent.

For some time, Mahesa, who was now known as Mahes Pandey, was not seen in the village. His debtors heaved a sigh of relief. But within fifteen days he was back again. They learnt that he had gone to Mirzapur and Chunar to look for stone for the temple. As for the idol, he had decided to import it from Jaipur.

It was people's guess that Mahesa's liquid assets were anything between eight to ten thousand rupees, without taking into account what he kept hoarded in the ground. His greed had by now reached the point of satiety. "I have nothing to live for now," he told Hafizee one day. "I've only one more responsibility to discharge. To build a temple and a *dharamshala*. Then my mind will be at peace. This was her last wish."

"It's a noble cause," Hafizee said. "When you take the job in hand many will come forward with their mite. Write me down for twenty-five rupees."

"I am short of funds." Mahesa looked glum. "They think I have a mint at home. The cement alone will cost three thousand rupees."

Mahesa was proceeding towards his house when he saw some unfamiliar faces going in the direction of the lake. They belonged

to a shikar party — four men and two women. Before he knew, Mahesa found himself following the party.

Stillness reigned over the blue lake, its edges moist like a wet eye. The long palm leaves trembled in the breeze like the crest of a bird. The young ones of the fish frisked around hyacinths. Bubbles rose to the surface as though the fish were disgorging pearls. Mahesa sat down by the edge of the lake. The cooing of black crested, white breasted birds fell on his ears. He watched them circling in the sky, as if tied by an invisible string, till one of them dived straight like an arrow. When it came up, a silver coloured fish was in its beak.

He heard music. It was the shikar party singing. Their song wafting over the tranquil water of the lake drifted into the void. Mahesa felt at peace with himself.

A flock of swans, cackling excitedly in unison descended at the other end of the lake. A couple of them, breaking away from the flock drifted into the wheat field, and started picking at the tender shoots. They looked around them warily every now and then, as if they were strangers to the place. Mahesa was deeply moved. They were birds of passage who would go away after a few months, like Parvati who had departed after giving him a few years of happiness.

The crane cracked. Proud of its white crest, it walked with a majestic stride, looking for some sandy stretch of land where it could lie in comfort. Suddenly it was startled by a loud noise which went booming in the sky. In the marsh, to his left, a female crane screamed. Its voice, shrill like the sound of a clarinet, kept echoing in the sky.

Bewildered, the male crane rose into the sky and circled over the female crane. Sometimes, descending to the marsh, it walked in circles, in long aimless strides, and screamed. The voice of the fallen female crane had cracked. Its neck writhed like a crushed serpent.

The swans rose from the bank and stalked into the nearby fields. The sylvan atmosphere of a moment ago had become nightmarish.

Mahes Pandey gazed at the faces of the shooting party. He thought that like Parvati's eyes, the eyes of the women, who accompanied the shooting party would be dim with tears. But they

wore a triumphant smile, in admiration of the hunter's marksmanship.

He returned home. In the lonely room, the scream of the dying bird kept haunting his mind, merging with the wail of Parvati, which he had heard when she was passing the last hours of her life in the hospital.

In the morning he could not hold himself back from again visiting the blue lake. The mist was slowly lifting from the lake. A pair of birds was eating moss. He proceeded towards the marsh. The crane was still there, digging its beak into the plumes of the dead bird, hoping to bring it back to life. He sat down under a tree and gazed at the swans, which had flown from far off Mansarovar, tucked in the altitudes of Kailash — the abode of gods. The plumes of gold finches scintillated in the morning sun. Mahes Pandey's heart was filled with sadness. These innocent birds, alien to his part of the land, why should he have any attachment for them?

When a survey party came to the village, people knew that electricity would soon come to the village. Mahes Pandey had heard that a lot of electricity was being generated in the Eastern region. Their village would be linked with one of the grids there.

Things moved fast. One day the village drummer went about proclaiming that some land belonging to the district board would be publicly auctioned on Monday the 4th of January in the compound of the Octroi Office. The site plans were open to inspection at the Office.

The 4th of January was still twenty days away. But the plot of land adjacent to his house had already gripped Mahes's imagination. It was an ideal site for the temple and the *dharamshala*.

He went round canvassing support for his scheme. "The money would be spent in a pious cause," he told them. "I'll contribute the major share. The *dharamshala* will be public property, managed by a trust. If all of you contribute twenty rupees each we can put the scheme through."

He opened an account in the Post Office with three thousand rupees. He went collecting money from house to house, omitting no one right from the local medical practitioner and the cloth

merchant, down to the petty sweetmeat seller. In a matter of days he was able to add another thousand rupees to the fund.

Mahes Pandey rose in public esteem. He had started wearing a saffron coloured turban and carried a staff. The daily exertion had told upon his health; but despite failing health he did not relax in his efforts. As the day of the auction drew nearer he became more and more pensive. His spirits drooped.

In the meantime many shikar parties visited the lake. The sight of soft-feathered lifeless birds dangling on sticks as they were carried away by the hunters made him mad, and he suddenly thought of Parvati. The birds who had descended from the hills, their feathers, white and soft as down. . . And Parvati's white teeth.

On the day of the auction, he got up earlier than usual and feeling low went to the lake to divert his mind. For some time he sat by the lake scattering the moss with his staff and pulling them out. The *nari* creeper was spread in the water like a wire mesh. Shells clung to its knots and its roots trembled like the fins of a fish. He went towards the marsh where *jalmanjri* flowers grew. Entering the marsh he plucked some flowers and made them into a bunch.

A flock of goldfinches, after spending the night by the lake was about to fly away when a bullet whizzed past. A goldfinch tumbled in the air and fell plop into the lake. Its golden feathers were scattered on the water. As the wounded bird struggled to get across to the other side of the lake a red line chased it. The hunters came out of the grove. The bird coming out of the water disappeared behind a bush. Only a solitary feather kept floating on the water.

Mahes Pandey felt empty. He threw away the *jalmanjri* flowers and returned home.

At the auction he did not bid for the plot of land. Instead, he purchased the blue lake. People were stunned. "Has he gone crazy," they asked. "He has tricked us in the name of the temple," they fumed. "He has played dirty with our money!"

Mahes Pandey had no answer. They would not have understood him.

At the end of March the birds migrated to the hills. The lake looked deserted. But Mahes Pandey knew that they would again be back in the beginning of August.

He hung a notice board on the first tree on the path leading to the lake:

"Shooting Strictly Prohibited."

Below it was written:

"By order : Mahes Pandey
Owner of the lake."

NOT BY FLESH ALONE

The lady doctor, after examining her, told her that though she was free from venereal disease she had unmistakable symptoms of incipient consumption. She wrote down a long prescription for her and advised her to take a nourishing diet.

The Municipal Committee had put a ban on indiscriminate prostitution. Those who failed in the medical test were worried. They had been asked to fold up their business and did not know how to fend for themselves. The lucky few, who came through in the test, strutted about saucily, bragging about their high pedigree. The comely ones, whom Ibrahim, the Contractor, had taken under his wing, infiltrated into decent localities of the city. The fellow kept an eye on them, and paid them month by month, at contracted rates, keeping the rest of their earnings for himself.

At her wits end, Jugnu also approached Ibrahim to find her a place somewhere. "Do you think it's that simple?" Ibrahim said curtly. "It's easier to palm off a girl to a bridegroom than to find a place for her. Customers are choosy. They prod and probe each tissue of a girl's body." Then he edged past her hautilly.

His remarks came as a blow to Jugnu. She thought she was still good for many years. The second blow, however, settled it. Shahnaz, the girl in the next balcony waved her hands in the air and said, "Arrr, don't put on airs. The day is soon coming when no one will climb the stairs to your balcony."

The whole lane was scandalised at Shahnaz's ominous prophécý. No one ever fulminated like this even at one's worst enemies. May the visitors have strength in their loins and more money in their pockets.

That evening Fatte came to her with a new man. The man lingered in the door, as if not sure of himself. In khaki trousers and a blue shirt, there was a stubble on his chin and he carried a bag in one hand. Jugnu's searching eyes detected a thin film of dust on his eyebrows and earlobes. She moved away from him and sat down on her cot. But the man kept standing, clutching the bag. She quietly took away the bag from him and put it by the side of the pillow.

But the man still showed no signs of moving. "Take off your shoes," she said impatiently.

When the man removed his shoes, a wave of stench rose from his feet, filling the small room. Many others who visited her stank the same way when they peeled off their clothes, specially Mansu, the grocer, who invariably came to her after eleven. When he had finished he would sit there holding the small of his back, as if he was stone dead. Jugnu had to help him to his feet and he would totter out of the room, scratching his thigh. For that matter, Kanwarjeet, the hotel-keeper, smelled no less and he kept belching loudly, uttering 'au,' 'au,' with every belch.

When Jugnu could not stand the smell of the man's feet she asked him to put on his shoes.

He obeyed without demur and then sat stock-still on the edge of the cot. Jugnu was annoyed. "Do you think you are sitting in your father's drawing room?" she said testily. "Unload yourself and bump off!"

The man felt slighted but he soon regained his composure. "What's your name?" he asked in a faltering voice.

"Jugnu."

"Where do you come from?"

"How does it concern you where I come from?" she said peeved. "Let's get down to business."

Then like every other person he asked: "Do you like your profession?"

"Yes, don't you?"

She stretched herself on the cot and pulled up her sari, baring a part of her thighs. He also lay down by her side and his hand moved up to her blouse.

"Don't be a pest," she said, hastily pushing away his hand. "Keep your hands off my blouse."

Completely put out, the man lay still by her side and looked at her face. There was a coating of cheap powder on her face, and lines of powder, like white strings, round her neck. Her lips were blotchy, as if blood clung to them in clots and her ear tops stood out like the eyes of a frog. Her hair was smeared with oil. The pillow case was soiled and the bed sheet looked like a crumpled jasmine flower.

Then his eyes roved over the room. In one corner lay a pitcher of water with an enamel mug by its side. There were some rags also in the same corner. By the side of the cot stood a small cupboard, in which lay a broken comb, a cheap nail polish and some hair pins. A few names and addresses were scribbled in pencil on one side of the cupboard. In another corner lay some film song books in a small heap and by their side some tasselled pigtaails like coiled serpents. The man's mind was filled with revulsion. To take his mind off what he saw around him he put his hand on Jugnu's thigh. The flesh was rubbery like stale fish and rough like coarse cloth. From her semi-exposed body rose a faint smell of starch.

"You may have all the time in the world, but not I," she said at last. "This is my hour of business. By now I would have ticked off four men." She firmly clutched the man in her arms.

When he got up from the cot, Jugnu, as if in jest, opened his bag. "You seem to carry a lot of money in the bag," she laughed. The man thought she wanted to filch another rupee or two. But the bag contained only a sheaf in loose papers, a newspaper and a loaf of bread.

"Don't forget me, when you visit the lane next time," she said as the man made for the door. "Come up straight to me." The man turned round, and for the first time, closely looked at her.

Whenever Jugnu went out she covered her head properly like a respectable woman. She did not do anything that invited lascivious remarks. They just cast longing looks at her, as all lustful men do, and no more. As she walked, she would look at them from the corner

of her eye, specially at those who had visited her and seemed to have a right over her. Then one day she saw him — the man with the bag. He was standing in the verandah of the first storey of a building, smoking a *bidi*, his elbows resting on the railing. He was wearing the same blue shirt. The shadow of a flag flying over the building trembled over her shoulder.

She stopped under the building to have her *chappal* mended. She didn't look up, but she knew the man had gone inside his room.

He came to her again that night. There was a hint of recognition in his eyes. This time he did not linger in the door but came in and sat down on the cot.

"What sort of job do you do?" she asked him.

"Nothing much," he replied. "I work among labourers."

"We are also labourers," she smiled. "You must take care of us also."

"Aren't you ready yet?"

"I'm not well today," she said in a listless voice.

"What's wrong?"

"I've a backache and my body seems to be going to pieces. I don't know what's gone wrong with me. May I call Tara? She's a nice girl. You'll like her."

He shook his head and after a while rose to go. "I drooped in just to see you," he said. Then he climbed down the dark stairs and was gone.

Jugnu came out and stood in the window. There were not many people in the lane. A few stragglers stood about in small groups. A man broke away from the ground every now and then and climbed up a staircase. Smoke curled up from the chimney of the baker's shop. She looked up at the wreath of curling smoke, thinking all the while that the man would have gone to some other girl. Then she saw him slowly walking through the lane. So he had not gone elsewhere. The thought pleased Jugnu. Turning back from the window, she closed the door and lay down on her cot.

The room was damp and a nondescript bottled-up smell seemed to pervade it. Jugnu picked up a book of film songs and started reading it.

There was a knock at the door and then Amma's voice: "Jugnu, my pet, you have been in a long time. I hope the wretch has not passed out."

"There's no one with me, Amma."

"Then come out on the balcony, child. There's a fine breeze blowing. The lane is full of people." Amma flung open the door. "Are you unwell," she asked, as she saw Jugnu lying on the cot.

"Yes, Amma. I'm feeling out of sorts. There seems to be something wrong with me."

"Better have a cup of milk, child," Amma said. "There's still time. Some one may yet turn up."

As Jugnu rose from her bed, Amma felt her neck with the back of her hand to make sure that she was not running a temperature and then she noticed the fold of flesh round her waist. "Your waist is getting thick," she said. "Don't neglect your morning exercise."

Suddenly there was a sound of squabbling in another corner of the building "Lo, that witch is at it again!" Amma said, alarmed. "She'll not allow herself to be saddled without creating a fuss. I tell you, some day there's going to be a murder in her room."

It was an everyday occurrence. Bilquis complained that Amma blamed her for nothing, for she was a spirited girl and no one left her room without having his back twisted. She said she was made that way and got huge fun out of it. When a man was about to depart, she would plant herself in the door and jeer at him. "Eh, Zubeda, darling," she would call her friend, "look at this Rustam — the he-man!" she would say, clapping her hands. "The wretch can't even make love properly."

One day a man flared up at Bilquis' riotous behaviour. "Stop barking, you bitch!" he exclaimed.

"Begone, you off-spring of a water carrier!" Bilquis retorted. "Here, take this four-anna bit. Buy some *malai* to build up your vitality!"

Utterly crestfallen, the man quietly descended the stairs, without looking back. The fact was that all the inmates of the building were scared of Bilquis. They feared that one day she may do something ghastly. But she was not one to be tamed easily. "I can even crush a he-man between my thighs," she would say, gesticulating boastfully.

She missed no opportunity to taunt Jugnu. "You're done for," she would tell Jugnu. "Go and find a permanent 'perch' somewhere like a domesticated animal." Jugnu did not mind. She knew Bilquis was foul-mouthed and did not even spare Amma — Amma who took care of all the girls. "You're spreading like a buffalo," Amma would warn a girl and advise her to wear a satin petticoat. She would tell another to consume less tea and a third to cut out potatoes. She had only one worry: "If I could, I would never let you girls grow old," she would say wistfully...

Jugnu came out into the balcony and watched the passers-by. The crowd was gradually thinning out and the flower sellers were closing their shops. Mannan, the gardener, as he passed by, flung a garland in Kalawati's window, and Kalawati as usual, made an obscene joke and then grinned at him. Then Jugnu saw Banne, the white-washer, making straight for Shahnaz's staircase.

Chunnilal, who was slightly loony had already spread his mat in front of Shanker, the betel seller's shop and was singing lustily. "I'll chop off my hand if any one can detect a false note in my singing," he declared. "O, cruel one," he sang on, "you'll be drawn towards me of your own accord. O, cruel one, we'll have our honeymoon on this mat. O, cruel one...!"

Jugnu suddenly saw the man in the blue shirt at the turning of the lane. Perhaps he had returned to town and had gone to someone else. She watched closely. But no, it was not the man in the blue shirt. Her mind had been playing tricks with her.

He visited her again after a gap of many days. Coming into her room he lay down on the cot as if it was his own house. He did not take off his shoes.

"May I know your name?" Jugnu said, lying down by his side.

"Madanlal . . . why?"

"I just wanted to know your name. I'm seeing you after a long time."

"I couldn't come. I was in jail. There was a spate of arrests. I was one of them."

"What happened?"

"There was a strike on. The mill owners had me put behind the bars. I had a hard time getting out."

"Do these strikes bring any results? Why did they go on strike?"

"Some workers were arbitrarily retrenched — that's without proper notice. Anyway, you won't understand these things. There were other reasons, besides. May I take off my shoes?"

"You may, if you like."

The room was filled with the stench from his canvas shoes and perspiring feet. Jugnu was not upset. She had got accustomed to the smell. In fact, it seemed to have seeped into her mind and become a part of her being.

It was in those days that the prostitutes were called up and asked to submit to medical examination. The lady doctor had told Jugnu that she had no venereal disease, but there were unmistakable signs of consumption. And then she had started coughing and running a temperature. Amma had taken her to the hospital but her temperature did not show any signs of coming down. Gradually, she became useless for nightly exertions. One day she spat blood. "Throw her out!" Bilquis fumed. "This wretch will infect all of us." Amma, of course, asked the girl to shut up but she was herself deeply concerned at Jugnu's condition. She advised her to go away somewhere for a change and also promised to give her some money to tide over her lean days.

With all doors closed upon her, Jugnu at last sought admission in a sanatorium. In between, she came to see Amma for a day or two. "Child, don't tell them that you are living in a sanatorium," Amma advised her. "Tell them that you are staying with a sister at Rampur. The Police Inspector made my life hell in your absence. He suspects you are secretly plying your business in some lodgings."

Amma was pained to see Jugnu's miserable condition. Her hair had started thinning and her complexion had become blotchy.

Despite the restrictions on prostitution many new girls had come from Lucknow and Banaras and had completely spoiled the market. She was told that Shahnaz had lost her old glory and Kalawati could just scrape enough to keep her going. Before going away Jugnu asked for a small loan from Amma. But Amma said she was herself in straitened circumstances and had no money to spare. Jugnu had every reason to feel worried.

As she passed through the lane she cast wistful glances at those who used to visit her in the first bloom of her youth.

Mansu, the grocer, was sitting in his shop. She recalled how he would squirm, holding his back and then go away scratching his thigh. Kanwarjeet, the hotel owner, was also there, in his soiled, crumpled pyjamas, busy counting money. The way he belched before getting out of her cot would make her feel queasy.

She could not stay in the sanatorium for long. For that matter, she knew that one day she would have to return to her trade. But she was grateful to those who had not turned their backs on her in her day of need. Whatever money they had given her she had carefully written down on the back of the prescription. Kanwarjeet, after much ado, had given her a loan of forty-seven rupees. Mansu had been less pretentious but he had thrown a broad hint that she should soon return the money, as if a sum of twenty-five rupees was going to give a serious setback to his business. Sant Ram, the fitter, had made a lewd joke while giving her twenty rupees. "One night in lieu of interest — agreed?" Jugnu was incensed. But she felt reassured. Her body was still good enough to sustain people's interest. That was indeed some consolation.

When hard up, she had taken a loan of thirty rupees from Madanlal too. "I'm giving it from the party fund," he said. "Return the money as soon as you can." She knew that he was a man of limited means. But his request had a ring of sincerity. "Please don't take me amiss," he added and then went away to his party office.

She was heavily in debt and to make matters worse, the police harassed her to pay up their monthly quotas, which had been in

arrears for the past seven months. They looked askance at any lapse in this matter.

Since her return from the sanatorium she had been feeling very weak and found it difficult to put up with the night's strain. Even a little patting and cuddling brought a fit of coughing and she would start panting after a few minutes. And those people — they just threw their full weight on her chest. She bought an old pigtail from Kalawati and had also started using cups over her bosom. Taking them off and putting them on once every while was a messy affair. But she had to do it. Much to her discomfort, she also wore fully starched saris, for they made her body look filled out.

But despite all this care her income was fast dwindling. Not many people turned up at night, and many a night she drew a blank and would just lie in bed moaning over her precarious existence, her broken body.

The sexually incompetents were the worse of the lot. They made up for their incompetence by playing with her body without coming to the point. She resented them for she found them too demanding. Better than them were those who came like loaded guns and then went their way without creating any fuss.

Every day she was sinking deeper into the mire. But there was no way out for she never had sufficient money to pay off her debts.

She was going to the barber-surgeon to consult him about the abscess on her thigh-joint when Mansu waylaid her. "It's a long time now," he said. "You're having a rip-roaring business. What about my money?" They stepped aside from the road.

"Believe me, I don't save a paisa," Jugnu said apologetically. "I'm having a hard time of it. A pity, you've stopped visiting me."

"I've stopped going to women," Mansu said blandly. "I've taken an oath on the holy Ganga water not to touch women. Look, I now wear a rosary of *tulsi* beads round my neck."

Jugnu could not help smiling and Mansu looked at her, discomfited.

They resumed their walk. Owing to the abscess, Jugnu walked with a lurch. Mansu looked greedily at her swaying hips. "Well, you haven't told me when you'll return my money," he asked again as they came to the end of the lane.

"Pick your money off my body if you've the strength," Jugnu said coquettishly, and then felt embarrassed at her own remark. But why maintain a false facade of dignity? She didn't want to die with a debt on her conscience.

The barber-surgeon told her that it would take time before the abscess was ripe enough for an incision and gave her a poultice to apply on the thigh. When she returned, it was getting on to be afternoon. Her co-professionals were sitting in front of their rooms, holding a gossip session, as a prelude to their preparations for the night's business. A group of teenagers passed through the lane, cutting lewd jokes at the women. One of the pimps chased them away. But they stopped at the end of the lane, and lifting their legs, they pulled up their dhotis or pyjamas, made obscene gestures at the women and then bolted.

As the evening approached the lane became alive. The flower sellers loudly hawked their garlands and the pan shops glittered with lights. A policeman came and settled down in front of Gaffoor's shop. This was a cue for Gaffoor to bring out bottles of liquor and sell them openly to the night revellers.

In the evening Jugnu removed the poultice from her thigh, and after sprucing herself, moved onto the balcony. The abscess had formed into a hard knot and gave her much pain. But in spite of that she managed to handle a customer or two. As she sat in the balcony she often wondered as to what lay in store for her. Would she have to go through life like a lame mare? Or would she be reduced to a state of penury, and like Bibbo and Champa, be driven to wearing a burqa and begging for alms in the name of Allah, outside the mosque? In moments of extreme dejection she even thought of taking poison or jumping into a well.

Hundreds had come and gone but she saw none among them who would have given her refuge. Those from whom she had

borrowed money were closely known to her. But she could not rely on them either. With age the fire of passion cooled down. They became staid, raised families and took to other pastimes. Gone were the old familiar faces. To live in the past had become a torture.

The only silver lining was her creditors who had not forgotten her. They often came to her to get their money's worth. She knew Mansu would come again and true to her expectation, come he did.

He still stank in the same way and as usual came after eleven. Due to the pressure on her thigh she cried out in pain. All strength seemed to have drained from her body. She could not even take him up to the door so that he should go away scratching his thigh.

When the stiffness in Mansu's back let up a little he sat up in the cot. "I hope you're keeping the count," he said. "Yes," Jugnu replied, helping him out of the bed.

The night was far advanced. Jugnu lay in bed staring at the wall, though there was nothing to see — except dirty, brown patches where she had once pasted up photographs of film stars cut out from film magazines. On a nail in a corner dangled a bunch of old glass bangles on a string, and in another corner along the wall lay an empty phial of nail polish.

Under the cot lay a small bundle of old tattered clothes and a tin box which, among other things, contained a piece of paper, its letters completely faded and indistinct. It was a dead letter having no meaning for her. She was past caring, for now there was no one to call her back. Between his life and hers the river of time had flowed past, cutting through the banks till she and her man were flung apart.

When she got up in the morning her body seemed to be falling apart. The pain in her abscess had flared up and she had again put on the poultice. But by evening she was again ready to face the night's ordeal. Going back to her room, she looked through the account, which she had scribbled on the side of the cupboard,

showing her who had been to her how many times and how much still remained to be liquidated.

For his twenty rupees, Sant Ram, the fitter, who was the most brazen-faced of the whole lot of her visitors, had already been to her four times and when he was about to go away after his fifth visit, Jugnu said: "What about the payment?"

"What payment?" Sant Ram's eyebrows went up.

"I squared up your account last time," Jugnu said in an abject manner.

"One helping is permissible in lieu of interest," Sant Ram winked at her. "Surely, you don't expect payment for nothing."

Jugnu looked at him, distraught. It was not in her nature to squabble like the other girls.

Kanwarjeet, the hotel keeper, was her biggest creditor. He had visited her only thrice, which meant that her debt had diminished by fifteen rupees. She had also reduced Mansu's debt to the extent of twenty rupees. She was still savouring the happy thought when the pain in her thigh again flared up. And then there was a knock at the door. It was Madanlal. His untimely visit galled her as if he was a usurer come to demand his money. But even so, she called him in. He put down his bag by a pillow and sat down on the cot. Jugnu looked inside the bag. There were a few posters, a flag neatly folded in two and two musty, dog-eared registers. Her heartbeat increased. She feared that he may ask her to pay up his debt.

"You've come after a long time," Jugnu said, breaking the silence.

"May I take off my shoes?"

"Yes, you may."

"May I close the door?"

"I'm in much pain. I've an abscess on the joint of my thigh. I can lie on my back but if I bend my knees, the pain shoots up, unbearably."

Madanlal suddenly stopped unlacing his shoes and looked at her, embarrassed. Jugnu was feeling none too well, but his presence seemed to have cheered her up.

After chatting with her for a while Madanlal rose from the cot. "I'll go now," he said picking up his bag. Then he cast a hungry look at her — as if he was reluctant to go.

"Your money..." Jugnu said in a faltering voice.

"No, no, I didn't come for the money," he said. "I came for you."

The sweat under his armpits shone like blobs of black ink and the veins on his forearms stood out. With his sweaty hand he caught Jugnu's hand. His hand was limp and warm like a fresh loaf of bread.

"I'll come some other time," he said and was gone.

Jugnu came out on the balcony. She was sorry that she had to turn him away, disappointed. From the balcony she kept looking at his receding figure till he stopped in front of the fourth house from hers. It gave her heart a wrench to find him standing there. Then she saw him disappearing into the stairs of that house. Her abscess suddenly throbbled with pain and she winced. The pain slowly subsided. Had she asked him, he would have perhaps agreed to stay back. She knew he had gone away, realising the wretched state she was in. There was no trickery in his sweaty hand.

Then Kanwarjeet appeared at the door — like an intruder. Despite her rising hatred, she gave him a pale smile and led him into her room. Kanwarjeet closed the door and put up the latch.

"Today I'm in much pain," Jugnu said in a listless voice. "The abscess may burst anytime."

"It hasn't healed yet?" he asked.

"It may still take a day or two," Jugnu said in an apologetic tone, clearly suggesting that he should stop pestering her.

"I'll do it very smoothly," Kanwarjeet said lying down in the cot.

"But today..."

Without allowing her to complete her sentence, Kanwarjeet held her hand and gently pulled her down on the cot. Turning on her side Jugnu switched off the light.

Suppressing her groans, she tried to shake off Kanwarjeet. Dark shadows descended before her eyes and as his weight fell upon her she felt as if her thigh would tear apart. Kanwarjeet hesitated once or twice and then the demon seemed to have possessed him.

"It'll be over in a minute," he said in a voice loaded with passion and then firmly clutched her body.

"You're killing me," she cried, fluttering like a wounded bird. She struggled for a while and then fainted.

"*Sali!*" Kanwarjeet fumed, and letting go of her, sat up by her side.

After a few minutes, when Jugnu came to, she waited for the pain to subside. Then she took a piece of cloth from under the cot and switched on the light. Her whole thigh was covered with pus. Kanwarjeet was sitting a little apart from her, looking very stupid, and belching every now and then.

"It has burst, has it?" he said, getting up from the cot. Jugnu covered her thigh with her sari.

"Keep a note of the count," he said moving towards the door. "It makes four times." Then he opened the door and slipped out of the room.

Pulling off her sari Jugnu started cleaning up the pus. The sight of so much pus sent tremors through her heart and she called for Fatte in a feeble voice. When Fatte came she asked him to bring her some water from the pitcher. She dipped a rag in the water and started wiping off the pus from her thigh.

"Listen, Fatte," she said while cleaning her wound. "A short while ago a man climbed up Bimla's stairs. If he is still there, ask him to see me before he goes away. He's wearing a blue shirt and carries a bag."

"A customer?" Fatte asked.

"No, a friend. And please give me some more water."

When Fatte brought her the water she said, "Forget about it. You need not call that man. He said he would come some other time."

She pressed the abscess. Some more pus came out. She winced and sweat broke out on her face.

THE SWANS OF MANSAROVAR

Anna, now there is hardly anything left to write home about. Even if there was, it would be to no purpose. It would be like writing you a letter and after dropping it in the sea wondering if it would reach its destination. And what is the use of letters which reach nowhere. One may as well write a story and forget about it. We have only one thing to say in the main, even though our individual sufferings and predilections take different forms. What is common to them all is the struggle that one has to put up to ameliorate one's lot. I don't know whether you still attend these meetings and where your comrades are now. The other day there was a news item in the paper that they had arrested an artist. Your friends must have felt shattered at the news. It must have also hurt you as much. Only one thing keeps obsessing me. If only we could crowd in 'that something more' in the limited time that has fallen to our lot. Even our worries which are so big that they dwarf that 'something more' cannot be contained in this allotted time of life. There is such a glut of hypocrisy and deceit around that we always seem to be waging a losing battle. How long can we carry on like this?

Maybe you still remember it. In one of your letters you had written that during the rains memories become more vivid. Perhaps the mind gets liberated after bathing in the rain . . .

That was also a rainy night. I was living in Manipur at that time — a small, dusty, provincial town. Anna, as you know there is a vast difference between the rains in a big city and a small town. In small towns one can clearly see the striking lightning but in the big cities the high rise buildings swallow it up. Have you ever seen gray and

yellow dust storms? In our town a dust storm is always the precursor of rain. It creates the impression as if the town has got lost in a labyrinth or the sky becomes so dark as if it has been invaded by a swarm of locusts. The fields start swaying violently as if they fear that the locusts may settle down on them.

Anna, one day I'll take you to my town on a visit for I want you to see everything at first hand — specially, when the countryside is suffering from drought. As the animals die, the vultures come swooping down upon them in hordes. I have watched these vultures for hours. What a ghastly sight they make! Strangely enough, the same vultures descend on the fields every year. The animals may be different but the vultures are the same every year. I'll show it to you, Anna, when you come.

It was a rainy night, the one I was talking about. Every thing was so vivid in my mind — a dark night and an old house which you have not seen till now. I was sitting beside a small lighted lamp when I saw a shadowy figure drenched in rain silhouetted against the rusted iron bars. It asked me something which I failed to comprehend. I opened the door a chink and looked at the figure. It was an old man — old and decrepit, resembling a *sanyasi* (an ascetic of the monkish order). It looked soiled and dirty as if a burnt corpse had risen from its ashes and made its way to this place.

Let me tell you, I have often had this kind of feeling, call it illusion, if you like. Those comrades of mine who were gunned down and met their death in this manner often seemed to have risen from the burning pyres and come back to me. But this old man did not seem to be an old acquaintance. And he did not seem to be in a hurry, nor anxious to talk to me. He looked at the damp walls and said: "Isn't this Jagdamba Dada's house?"

You will be surprised, but it's a fact that even on hearing my father's name, for a moment I could not bring myself to believe that this was how my father was called. I don't remember him. I must have seen him in my childhood of which my memory has completely faded.

After a moment or two when my father's name had registered on my mind, I said, "Yes, it's the same house. Where are you coming from?"

"From Tibet," he said blandly as if he had not come from a far off place but from the next lane. Then he asked me in the same bland voice, "Who are you?"

I thought the question rather odd but there was no sting in his voice. "I'm his youngest son," I said looking at him intently.

This relationship did not seem to have any significance for him for he evinced no interest in what I had said. "Who else is there in the house?" he asked in a slow drawl.

"My mother," I replied.

"Would you mind calling her?" he said.

As mother came out everything became clear. The old man was my uncle — Senapati Chacha who had come back from Tibet after nearly thirty years. He had taken to Buddhism there and had come with a fugitive Tibetan caravan led by the Dalai Lama. The old man's memories had accompanied him. Perhaps it was the rain that had washed his memory of its dross.

He was now an alien in this country, without a country and a home. There no question of any give-and-take with him. He had only come to see what he had left behind long ago. He spoke like a philosopher and in spite of his seventy-odd years he did not betray any signs of decrepitude. He did not look defeated for not having made good in life. He only seemed to be weighed down under a sense of remorse.

I know, Anna, you and your comrade are not a vanquished lot. Nor are my comrades and me. We are not vanquished but oppressed. Firing, arrests, atrocity, deception, have eaten into the society's vitals like dampness undermining a house's foundations. This hypocrisy and double dealing have entered every home like a tornado. Oh, what darkness. What's the world coming to, Anna? What's in store for us. I know not where you are. How you are. Do you remember the time when my resolve had weakened and you had tried to buoy up my spirits by saying that we should love and live life to its dregs. But how shallow love can appear when we are

professing it openly. In the midst of the struggle which had become the be-all and end-all of our lives, to steal a little happiness seemed like sacrilege.

Tell me, Anna, will all of us be also liquidated like aliens? What does all this amount to? Won't we have a sense of belonging for some places, some person before we fade out of life?

You will be horrified by Chacha Senapati's life-story even though his life and our lives don't touch at any common point. Our times and his times lie so far apart. And yet there is something in his story which fills us with anger and destroys our faith in the goodness of things. It leads us to believe that faith in someone is rewarded by perfidy and treachery.

Perhaps you don't know that before Independence this small town of ours was a semi-dependent estate under the suzerainty of a British governor in whose eyes the estate was suspect and he was all the time fearing that the people may one day raise a flag of revolt against him. The revolutionary, Gaindalal Dixit's *Shivaji Samiti* was very active at that time and Manipur had become the hotbed of political intrigues. The members of the *Maitrivedi* and *Shivaji Samiti* were playing the same role that you are playing these days. When the British rulers learnt about these seditious activities and Somdev became a turncoat of the British, Ram Pershad Bismal had to go underground and Gaindalal Dixit made a bid for escape by taking shelter somewhere in Kota. It was then that the British government's wrath fell on this estate.

At that time Senapati Chacha was serving as a havildar in the state army. He embraced Buddhism much later.

The British army laid siege to the fort. A battle ensued. It was an unequal fight. Raja Saheb retreated towards Banaras. My grandfather was serving in a small battalion loyal to the Raja Saheb. He was killed and the Raja Saheb was captured. The young Rani Saheba promptly came to terms with the Britishers. Chacha changed his allegiance from the Raja to the British.

Anna, these were the days of great political upheaval. The Britishers were welcomed with open arms in the fort and feted. The state army was made to lay down its arms and the young Rani was

put at the helm of affairs, a contingent of a hundred soldiers being placed under her command for the defence of the fort and as the symbol of the Rani's status. In fact this hundred-soldier strong army was more of a showpiece which the people had nick-named as the 'saluting army!' My Chacha was the real commander of the 'saluting army.' One day he had visited our home, wearing his uniform, medals, ribbons and all. He had been assigned a *zemindari* and given a *haveli* (mansion) near the fort. He was also given the Rani's four-poster soaked in perfume, as a gift.

The country was passing rough chaotic times. Senapati Chacha had become the uncrowned king of the estate but the doors of his own house were closed upon him. It was actually his grandfather's horse who was killed while fighting against the Britishers.

Anna, I still remember that Chacha's name was anathema in his own house. His entire family held him in contempt. My mother had told me all this on the night when Senapati Chacha had come home drenched in rain.

"Do you recognise me Bhabi?" he had asked.

There was contempt on mother's face. The thirty long years since she had met Senapati last had made her taciturn and serious-minded. "What has happened to those medals of your and the sword the Britishers had bestowed upon you," she asked in a voice full of sarcasm.

Chacha had looked at mother with a deadpan expression and then sitting down he bowed his head in silence.

"Senapati, you must be knowing that the Britishers are gone?" Mother again said in a voice tinged with sarcasm. "You don't have anybody here whom you can call your own. They are all living in Lucknow or Delhi from where they are running the administration. Had you not disappeared you would have also been a part of the administration and enjoying its spoils. That's the place for you. You have nothing here to fill your pockets."

I couldn't make out anything from mother's behaviour. Why was she so bitter with Chacha? It was only much later that I learnt about Chacha's disappearance though the reason for his doing so still eluded me.

"Senapati, this is your youngest nephew," Mother emerged from her silence and pointed towards me. "We still honour our family's tradition. This young man is also not afraid of dying and is ever ready to take the plunge even if it costs him his life. What difference does a change of rulers make . . .?"

A woman of few words, I wondered what made Mother gush forth like this? Perhaps it was her self-respect and inflated ego at work.

"Bhabi, go on, have your say," Senapati said at last. "I've come prepared to put up with all this calumny. But for my mental turmoil which has been tormenting me all these years I would not have come back from Mansarovar. There would have been no point in my embracing Buddhism or returning to my country after so many years as a fugitive with the Dalai Lama's entourage. Bhabi, the mark of a wise man is that he always wants to live as a free man. Not only for himself as a stooge of the powers that be, but in the service of one and all. He abides by certain principles of life without deviating from them under the stress and strain of circumstances."

I was feeling utterly confused, having failed to get the hang of the whole thing. It was a long saga — Senapati Chacha as the commander of the 'saluting army,' his clandestine role as the Rani's paramour, his trip to Mansarovar, his incognito stay in Tibet and subsequent visit to India with the Dalai Lama's entourage on the eve of the Chinese invasion. Anna, it was such a bewildering story, full of deceit, intrigues, love, sacrifice, remuneration, worldly wisdom of things mundane and things spiritual — stories which are repeated in every age only to delude us.

Anna, we are the swans of Mansarovar who fall foul of people of Chacha's ilk. After the deception does it really matter if one becomes a Buddhist or an ascetic?

This relates to the times when the revolutionaries were playing with their lives and Senapati Chacha was having the time of his life with the Rani in her palace. When an *Angrez* Commissioner or Collector visited his estate he would come out of the fort at the head of his 'saluting army' in full regalia and pompously salute the officer. He hounded out revolutionaries on the plea that he was

doing so for the good of the common man and to bring him prosperity. He maintained that the time was not far off when the *Angrez Bahadur* would withdraw from the scene after putting us on our feet. According to him the deserving would get their rightful place and the revolutionaries who came as obstacles in the way of the deserving would be exterminated.

Apparently, the innocent people of the area were again being taken for a ride in the same way as Senapati had deceived the swans of Mansarovar.

It is a horrendous episode of Senapati's life, Anna. There's nothing left to be said after the deed is done. Remorse after is of no avail. The harm had been done. It would not have brought the swans to life.

As the story goes, the young Rani was afflicted by rheumatism. Here was an opportunity for Senapati to prove how madly he was in love with her. The court *vaidya* (indigenous doctor) said that if the Rani was given swan's flesh to eat it would bring a radical cure. Rheumatism and swan's flesh! It sounded so grotesque, Anna.

Accompanied by six soldiers, Senapati set out on the long journey to Mansarovar, reaching the lake after a hazardous journey extending over many months. When they reached there, snow was falling over the lake, its white flakes covering the water like the white swans floating over it.

But it was easier to kill the swans than to catch them alive. The seven soldiers in uniform went round the lake looking for a vantage point from where to entice the swans. But the swans would not venture far; they kept floating in the middle of the lake. If the soldiers aimed their guns at them they would withdraw still further into the lake and then stretching their long silken necks they would gaze at the soldiers with their frightened eyes.

"It would be futile to fire at them," Senapati said at last.

"But why?" a soldier asked.

"They will die in the middle of the lake and it will be impossible to retrieve them from there. Can any one of you dare to swim across the lake?"

The party came back to the camp, utterly dejected and kept brooding over the matter the whole night. The next morning they again repaired to the lake.

The swans were floating on the water as on other days.

They all sat down on the bank of the lake. Soon they saw the swans floating towards the bank unwarily, without any show of fear. They came to the bank and after fluttering their wings stretched them out in full. The soldiers lost no time in catching some of them and twisting their necks. They had obtained the precious flesh for the Rani.

This morning the soldiers had not come in their uniforms but in the garb of *sanyasis* and the swans had walked into their trap.

After this Senapati Chacha vanished from there. He went to Tibet and became a Buddhist.

And now he had returned after thirty years as an alien, weighed down with remorse. But what difference does it make, Anna, even if one comes wearing the robe of repentance? But it is a different story which one day an ardent humanist, a worshipper of beauty may narrate to you with all the embellishments of a story teller. But it will be beyond my comprehension nor will it be relevant to my times.

THE KING WITH NO PROGENY

“There was a childless king,” Ma used to narrate the story. Eager children would sit around her listening, clutching flowers in their little fists, which they would offer to Gauri, goddess of happy wedlock, after the story was finished. Wheat flour was strewn in artistic patterns on the floor where six small earthen pitchers representing the deities would be placed, one over the other. The top one would be adorned with vermilion and the other five underneath received *puja* indirectly through the one atop. On one side an earthen lamp would burn with a steady flame and closeby was a sacred pitcher with a Swastika painted with red powder. As they listened to the story, the children's impatience to make the flower offering would gradually give way to rapt concentration in the story itself.

“There was a childless king,” Mother used to narrate. “Plenty and prosperity reigned in his kingdom. The various sects and classes were content with their professions. No one was afflicted. His queen was like the goddess Lakshmi; beautiful like the moon... and deeply loved by the king. He looked after the affairs of his state and lived happily with his queen in the palace. . .”

Before my mind's eye was the king of my fancy — King Jagpati. Jagpati and I were chums. We went to the middle school together. We hailed from families of the same social status. And therefore, we grew very intimate with each other. After matriculating, I got a job in a school and Jagpati started working as a lawyer's clerk. The same year he got married to Chanda, a girl from a nearby village. But it so happened that the marriage turned into a mockery. The bride's people were of the opinion that the girl should not be sent away

with the bridegroom right after the wedding. They believed that the seventh and the final *phera* (the couple going round the sacred fire) should take place only at the time when it was auspicious to send her finally to the in-law's house. Jagpati's wife had some education, but none dared erase the deep-etched markings of family tradition. The marriage party had to go without the bride. The bridegroom's people felt bad and they decided that Jagpati should be married to some other girl, no matter if she were lame or one-eyed. On no account would they bring the former bride to the house. But by the year's end everything took a turn for the normal. The bride's people asked forgiveness for their past behaviour and Jagpati's wife came to live at her in-law's house.

Jagpati was on top of the world. The mother-in-law showered her choicest blessings on the daughter-in-law and made over the household keys to her explaining the full details of the home set-up. She had been waiting for this day for long. Now she heaved a sigh of relief. She devoted her time to the worship of god and in meditation. Her afternoons were engaged in visiting the neighbours and gossiping with them. But she was asthmatic and her health continued to decline. The day soon came when she was on her death bed. She then called Chanda to her bedside and said, "Daughter, Jagpati has been brought up with great love and care. Ever since your father-in-law died, I have met every whim and fancy of his... Now that Jagpati stands on his own feet he has become an eyesore for other members of the family. Your father unwisely refused to send you to our house after the marriage. My brother-in-law, who bore enmity towards us, got the chance of their lifetime. They worked up a storm and beguiled us into thinking that nothing would be more humiliating than accepting you. In fact these people are still smouldering with jealousy because of the marriage. Under the pretext of maintaining the family prestige, they wanted to make a mess of it and enjoy the situation. Now, dear daughter, the family honour rests on your shoulders. Had your father-in-law been alive today, I would have..." Tears welled up in her eyes and she breathed her last.

She died with a wish unfulfilled. Despite four years of waiting no child was born to Chanda whom she could fondle. Chanda too had made a mental compromise that she would pass her life loving the family's only progeny, her husband.

It was an atmosphere of magnanimity, surcharged with a feeling of mutual belonging that pervaded their home. She felt as if there was a balmy coolness in the dark, lonely small rooms that charmed her. The sound of every latch had a familiar ring for her ears and she could recognise each door by its creak.

"Once the king went a-hunting," Ma proceeded. "Whenever he went out on such excursions he would return to the palace by the seventh day. But this time the king did not return within the scheduled time. The queen was very worried. She set out to look for the king along with the prime minister..."

Meanwhile Jagpati had to go out to attend the marriage of a distant cousin of his, Dayaram. Before leaving he promised to return within ten days. But just on the sixth day the news came that Dayaram's house had been raided by dacoits. Some hostile person had given out the information that Dayaram had been given plenty of gold and silver in dowry... the bride being the only daughter of an ancestral zamindar family.

By that time all the guests who had come to attend the marriage had left. The night before Jagpati was to leave, robbers came. How could young blood brook the challenge? Everyone was terrified as the dacoits started firing. But Jagpati and Dayaram girded up their loins and brandishing their sticks pounced on the enemy. There was a lot of weeping and yelling by the women folk. The robbers fired incessantly. The main gate collapsed. Jagpati roared: "Youngmen, go ahead! The flying bullets are no match for our oil-soaked sticks."

But the gates were knocked off one after the other and finally a bullet shot across Jagpati's thigh and another entered his hipbone.

Invoking the gods for mercy and help, weeping and bewailing, Chanda reached the scene of tragedy. Jagpati had already been admitted to a hospital. Dayaram had sustained minor injuries and

was soon on his feet. Chanda put up in one of the hospital rooms meant for the patients' relations. Dayaram's village lay four miles off from there. Every alternate day someone would come from there with whatever things were needed for Jagpati. But gradually these visits became infrequent, and eventually stopped altogether. It was not a minor injury which could heal up in a day or two. Jagpati's thigh-bone was fractured and a deep cavity had formed in the hip after the operation.

It was a small hospital. Generally the compounder would look after the patients. The doctor was rarely seen. He was around only for the dignitaries of the town. For the rest, the compounder alone was god incarnate. Right from worrying about the lodging and boarding problems of the patients and their relations, to keeping a twenty-four hour vigil over the sick person's pulse it was his headache alone. The six-bed hospital was housed in a small building. Adjacent to the main ward was the dispensary with a low table and an easy chair, which was there for the doctor, but had become the permanent seat of the compounder, Bachansingh. The incoming patients, by and large, were either the crime heroes or stray cases of fracture. Women patients were seen there only once in a blue moon as if they were immunised against disease. If a woman fell ill, a male member of the family would generally describe the ailment and obtain medicine for a week or ten days; then there would be no further news of her at all.

That day Bachansingh came to dress Jagpati's wound. He unwrapped the bandage with as much easy carelessness as if he were undoing a wrongly-tied turban. Chanda held her breath as she looked on. While still at it, he talked to other patients too. He would just throw a fleeting glance at the bandage and the rest of the job was automatically done by his deft fingers. During the unwrapping he reached the point where the bandage was stuck to the skin due to the drying up of the blood. Jagpati cried out and a shriek involuntarily escaped Chanda's throat. Bachansingh stared and looked up. He saw that Chanda had stuffed her sari into her mouth to stifle a fearful cry. Jagpati writhed with pain like a fish in

a net. Bachansingh's fingers trembled a little and just then a tear dropped on his arm.

A thrill ran through Bachansingh and the habitual callousness of his hands was tempered with a soft touch of humanity. Sighs, shrieks, cries of anguish and sinking breaths were things of everyday experience which had hardened his sensibilities. With detachment he could squeeze out pus from wounds, chip off skins recklessly... But that day his deadened sensibilities stirred again. He moistened the bandage and began undoing it with the tender caution of a novice. Softly he looked up at Chanda and whispered: "Tut, tut, crying will only weaken the patient's will."

But he was himself put out by the lameness of his statement for he had acquired this casualness due to the everyday monotony of cries and sighs and not because of a conscious awareness to keep up the spirits of the patients. So long as he was busy dressing Jagpati he was lost in the pathos of that pair of eyes.

While washing his hands, he gazed fixedly at Chanda's profusely bangled wrists which begged their happiness from him. Before leaving for the dispensary, he beckoned Chanda aside and said, "Don't be disheartened... the thigh wound will heal up soon, the other will take some more time. I will give him the best medicines. In fact there are medicines which work miracles but they don't reach our hospital... but..."

"Can't those medicines be arranged from elsewhere," asked Chanda. "They can be, but the patient himself has to spend for them... and they are..." said Bachansingh.

At Chanda's silence, Bachansingh unwillingly blurted out: "Should you need anything, do let me know... as for the medicines I will manage them somehow. If the headquarters are requested it would mean months of waiting. I will arrange for them through the city doctor. Your husband needs some tonics too. Anyway... I will see..." and he stopped in the middle of the sentence.

Chanda's eyes glistened with gratitude as she looked at him, as if a storm-tossed leaf had found a niche. She went to Jagpati and sat by his bedside. She began caressing his palms and pressing his finger nails.

The evening shadows deepened. Bachansingh brought a lantern and left it in a corner of the ward. While massaging Jagpati's hands Chanda said, "Compounder Sahib was saying..." and she paused to draw his attention. "What was he saying?" Jagpati asked distractedly. "That you need some tonics!"

"I know."

"But..."

"Look Chanda, one has to cut one's coat according to the cloth. These medicines are simply beyond us."

"Is money more important than man? You..."

"We will discuss it later."

"Compounder Sahib will arrange for them. I will request him."

"No, Chanda, I don't want to be cured by getting into debt. Let the ailment take its own time."

"But this..."

"You don't understand, Chanda. Indebtedness is like leprosy. Once you fall a prey, it will not only corrode your body but the soul also."

"But..." She stopped half-way again. Jagpati turned his face as a gesture of sticking to his stand.

On the third day on the table next to Jagpati's bed stood an array of tonics and a charpoy was there in Chanda's room. When Chanda came in she saw a tumult of feelings and impulses reflected on Jagpati's face as if, in addition to the illness, he was also struggling with his soul. He seemed to be confronted with Chanda's inexperience of the world, her affection for him and above all the benefactor's mercy.

Chanda could not bear that reaction in him. She felt like asking him if he had never borrowed money in the past. But that was perhaps his own personal affair which he did not need to admit to her and therefore it involved no hesitancy on his part. Was it because it was her doing that a false sense of manly pride had been awakened in him? But Jagpati's agony born of deeply felt idealism made a stealthy inroad in her heart. Running her palm over his brow Chanda spoke to Jagpati in her own natural way: "These medicines are not here because of anyone's generosity. I gave my

bracelet to be disposed of. That's how they have been procured." "And I wasn't even consulted," Jagpati said, as if overcoming his own edifying thoughts that it was better to be under Bachansingh's obligation than to have disposed of the bracelet. He was feeling slightly repentant too as to why at times he was swept off his feet and talked and preached like the learned ones.

With the approach of dusk Chanda got up to go to her room. She had somehow suppressed the fact that Bachansingh had also sent a charpoy for her. She took out her bracelet and instantly left for the dispensary where Bachansingh was resting in the doctor's chair under the lone, pale light of the lamp, with his legs stretched out. Jagpati's behaviour had pricked her conscience. There was really no need to be burdened with Bachansingh's generosity at this early stage. After all, the ornaments could never be more important to her than her husband. Boldly she dashed into the dispensary. She was familiar with the layout of the room as she had seen in day light; the arrangement of the table, chair and the medicine chest, etc., were known to her. It was rather dark in there because the lamp was throwing a bright halo of light around itself, rendering the corners of the room comparatively darker. Bachansingh recognised Chanda at once. He stood up. Chanda stepped in, but shuddered inwardly and stopped as though she had voluntarily hurled herself into a dark well — a well which had gradually grown narrower... whose depth touched infinity and once trapped, she was going down incessantly to where it was darkness, devastating solitude, suffocation, sin...

Speechless, Bachansingh stared at Chanda. Quickly, Chanda went back as if to liberate herself from the clutches of a dreadful demon. In a flash, Bachansingh comprehended the situation. He did not stir from his place and his voice, steady but subdued, distinctly vibrated into the air: "Chanda." It was so unlike a voice, and though inconsequential, it suffused the surrounding silence with substance.

Chanda stopped.

Bachansingh went near her and stopped too. The dense tree in front was hushed. The outline of its black shadow would grow

larger to envelop them and shrink back the next moment to liberate them. The lamp suddenly flickered and a groan rose up from the patients' ward, crossed the far end of the field and died there. Chanda's eyes were downcast as before: "I came here to give you this bracelet," she said constrainedly. "Then why were you going away without handing it over to me?" Chanda kept quiet. After a second or two she slowly held out the gold bracelet towards him as if lacking the requisite courage, she was performing an essential duty.

Bachansingh surveyed her from top to toe and his eyes lingered on her head covered with a part of her sari, suggesting the long tresses of her hair, with their oily silkiness and their smell wafting all around. "Let me have it," he softly uttered.

Chanda advanced the bracelet toward him. Taking it into his hand he said: "Listen." Chanda raised her eyes. Looking down into them and taking her hand into his own, Bachansingh put the bracelet back on her wrist saying: "Married women have always been my weakness, Chanda!"

Chanda moved away to her room without a word and Bachansingh to the dispensary. The darkness grew immeasurably dense and the shadow of the yonder tree grew darker. Though both of them had gone away from the spot, it appeared as if something was left over in that blackness. The lamp's flame, which had flickered in full, cleaved into two for want of oil and a spiral of smoke curled over it like a snake and vanished into the darkness.

The next morning when Chanda came to the ward to tidy up his bed, Jagpati felt that she was very sad. Every moment countless emotions were reflected on her face expressing inner perplexity, pain and helplessness, a dull glow of heartfelt repentance over a sin committed unseen...

"Disappointed, the queen returned to the palace with the prime minister. But the king was already home," Ma would take up the thread of the story. "But the king did not like his queen's going away with the prime minister. The queen tried to convince the king that it was only her boundless love for him which had made her go in search of him.

"The king and queen were exceedingly fond of each other, but the absence of a child perpetually pricked their hearts. The glowing flame of the king's dynasty was on the verge of dying out! Life was becoming meaningless in the absence of a progeny — a fear of the royal family losing its prestige was lurking around..."

The next day while changing the bandage, Bachansingh told them that he had been transferred to the general hospital at Manipuri and that he would leave the town the day after. In a way Jagpati was happy at the news, every other day there was some illness or the other; now that Bachansingh was going to their hospital it meant having someone to bank on. He would get well one day and then would naturally be going to his home, Manipuri. But the next moment his heart was filled with untold heaviness. No sooner did Chanda come to his mind he apprehended sharp thorns behind the news — thorns, which could prick him any time, pierce him unawares. And then the boundary lines of a man's claim over his woman started wavering and getting effaced like a thin streak of smoke. A thousand images of the demon king Ravana stealing away Sita in the guise of the beggar-saint floated before his eyes.

A fortnight later, as Jagpati had recouped enough to walk about a little, Chanda brought him back home. The night had fallen when they unlocked the door of their house. Darkness used to fall in their lane even when it was still evening. But as they entered the lane, they felt as if they had returned to their 'kingdom' after a long banishment in the forests.

On the shoulder of the lane, gambling shells were being cast in Jamuna goldsmith's parlour and one could see a ray of lantern light peeping through the slits in his door, throwing into relief the smoke of raw tobacco which had concentrated thickly at the mouth of the blind lane. Opposite that, Munshiji was sitting in the pit of his sagging cot along with his account books, busily adjusting his weighing scales, under the dim light of his tiny dim oil lamp. As Jagpati's door creaked, his aunt peeped out of her window and loudly announced for the benefit of whole house: "The childless

king has returned from the hospital. The 'motherhood incarnate' is also with him."

On hearing these words Jagpati sat down panting as he entered his dark parlour. Irritably he said to Chanda, "Do you want me to stumble and break my bones in the dark? Why don't you go in and bring some light?" "I doubt if we have oil for the lamp. Tonight if we could manage without..."

"You will never have anything, neither oil nor..." he abruptly cut his words short and spoke no further. And Chanda felt that he had assailed her barrenness for the first time with a severity which she had never fathomed before. Silence fell between the two and without a word they both went inside. Engulfed in the prolonging silence, two distinct emotions played on the heart of each. The sarcastic remark was resounding into Jagpati's ears, 'here comes back the childless king from the hospital,' and Chanda's heart was pierced by the word, 'you will never have anything...'

Sobbing into her pillow Chanda eventually dropped off to sleep. But sleep eluded Jagpati's eyes. Lying in bed, he felt as if he was diminishing till he was reduced to a mere point. But the point had limbs and a throbbing heart. The stifling darkness of the room... smudged walls and cave-deep almirahs from where someone was repeatedly peeping out... and he shuddered. Then everything seemed to change... he became a human being, grew into a healthy, stout man and something impetuously boiled in his veins struggling to gush out. His hands, in proportion to the body, became gigantic, monstrously terrifying, with long nails growing out of them. He became a monster, a giant, an aborigine barbarian.

For a flash, the room seemed to revolve sharply around him. Gradually everything grew steady and stationery and his breath appeared to be returning to normal. Then, as if after an enormous effort, a voice broke out from his choked throat: "Chanda."

The murmur of Chanda's mellow breath filled the room with life again. Jagpati bent forward putting his elbows on the bedstead. He came down from his bed with his head resting against Chanda's bed. He felt that the song of life was echoed in the sound of Chanda's breathing. He got up and leaned over her face. He gazed

for a long time at the fair face in the darkness and felt as though a glow was being emitted and diffused from it... her features shone and Jagpati's eyes filled up with light. Bewitched thus, he went on staring at her.

Chanda's dishevelled hair smelling like the soft hair of a new born baby... their milky fresh fragrance... the sweetness around her body and that forehead with soft and silky downs sprouting near the locks and upon it a faint suspicion of a vermillion mark, the placidly sleeping petite eyelids with the harmless pointed eyelashes. The candid cadence of her soul emanating through her breathing... the petal-like lips and the untouched lines upon them radiating nothing but a milky aroma.

A feeling of affection surged within him — just affection and nothing else, and unawares he mumbled: "Child!"

Softly and cautiously he put one of her curls on his palm and began caressing it by drawing lines along its length. He had a feeling that an infant, restless to crawl into his lap, had gone to sleep disappointed and exhausted. He had just spread out both his palms to clasp her head to his heart when his fingers touched against some hard substance. It jerked him back to his senses.

Carefully he searched under her pillow. Something wrapped up in a kerchief came to his hand. Struggling to control himself, he slumped down on the floor, untied the kerchief. Seeing its contents he felt the sting of a scorpion. They were the two gold bracelets of Chanda.

The universe began disintegrating into flying splinters. "Was it not that she had disposed of them for the sake of his treatment? All those medicines and tonics! Didn't she tell him that they were no one's charity, that she had disposed of these... but..." and his throat was badly parched. His tongue stuck to his palate. He wanted to shake Chanda into wakefulness, but his energies seemed to have drained out of him and his blood turned to water.

After he had recovered a little, he wrapped up the bracelets and slipped them back under the pillow. With an effort he tumbled on to his charpoy.

So Chanda had told a lie; but why? Why did she maintain that distance? Why, what for? And his heart turned heavy. He felt again that his body was shrinking and he was reduced to a frame of mere straw sticks — absolutely light at the mercy of every gust of wind.

From that night onwards, Jagpati thought every day of asking her for the bracelets so that he could sell them and start some modest business, for he was no longer employed. The *vakil sahib* had engaged another clerk as Jagpati had absented himself for long during his illness. Daily he thought of it. But as soon as he was face to face with Chanda a strange inertia came over him. He felt that if he asked for the bracelets he would wean even the wifehood away from Chanda. God had already deprived her of motherhood — what would remain of Chanda after that? What meaning would life hold for a woman who would be devoid of both motherhood and wifehood? How could he extinguish the last traces of light from her existence? She would be totally blinded. If he asked for the bracelets how could he cover up the shame laid bare by stripping the heart naked of a secret history?

Lost in such thoughts he tramped about the whole day in search of job. Should he take a loan? But against what? What were his material possessions which could stand as security against a loan? And the neighbours or the inmates of the *mohalla*... a bargain struck without haggling? They would not mind walking for miles together if it meant a penny's saving. They bought spices in microscopic quantities, calculated the amount a hundred times, entreated the shopkeeper with folded hands to accept partial payment for the time being and thus brought their purchases home. If a peddler got netted in their *mohalla*, there would be a scramble for bargains and they would purchase things in small lots hoping to get more. The slightest difference in price and there would be a flare up and lengthy arguments. They bought stale and rotten vegetables in the afternoons to save a few coins. Would he not be mocking their poverty by asking such people for a loan?

In the evening as he reached home he saw a cycle in the verandah. He strained his mind but could not guess as to who the visitor could be. When he reached the inside door, he hesitated as

he suddenly heard the sound of laughter coming from there, a laughter with a shade of intoxication in it. Then he heard Chanda's voice: "He will be coming back soon, please wait for a few minutes more... see him for yourself and make him understand that he is not yet fit to roam about like this the whole day long." "Yes... it takes time to convalesce; if he is not careful he will come to grief," a male voice said. Jagpati hesitated for a moment. Should he make a dash into the room? What was the harm in it? But when he made a move he discovered that his feet were directed outwards. And an idea struck him as his hands fell upon the cycle. Pretending to be ignorant, he shouted, "Chanda, whose cycle is this? Who has graced our..."

Chanda came out on hearing him and said, as if breaking some good news: "Our compounder sahib is here. After days of bother, today he has been able to find our house. He has been waiting for you!"

"Who! Bachansingh? Well, well, I was wondering who could..." Jagpati walked up to him and flung into conversation, resigning himself completely.

When Bachansingh had gone, promising to pay them a visit again, Chanda spoke to Jagpati in a very intimate tone: "People are really strange..."

"Why, what happened? What is strange about people?" Jagpati asked.

"Could you come inside somebody's house on a mere acquaintance and linger there when the menfolk are not in? If it were you, you would walk back at once," Chanda said and looked straight into Jagpati's face to seek the indication of an affirmative reaction. Jagpati's glance confirmed it.

"Bachansingh is a type by himself — a type which has no two of its kind..."

"Let him be... but..." Chanda's voice trailed off.

"He is a man to stand by in times of adversity, but the easier it is to take advantage of him, the more difficult... I mean... If one is obliged to him something will have to be given in return," Jagpati said avoiding her eyes. Chanda got up and went away.

After this, Bachansingh started visiting the house almost everyday. Jagpati too was seen going out with him; but a quaint suffocation choked Jagpati's heart when he was with him and all sorts of vexations of life obtruded upon his consciousness. He was a man without a job; granted, that two square meals was not a terrifying problem for him and that he was not starving or suffering from lack of shelter. But he had a human body with hands and feet which yearned for something more. And he pondered over what that something was — happiness? May be yes, may be no. He was accustomed to breathe in pain; he was an extraordinary creature who could thrive on want. Was it lust? May be yes, may be no. He had sweated for money. But coppers had not been able to quench the elusive thirst. Then... then what was it? What was that, which like cancer, ceaselessly poured out its secretion within him and begged for its cure. May be it was work. Yes, this was exactly it — work, which would fill the gap and the void of his dreary existence, which would utilize his energy, engross him and make his life meaningful. He wanted nothing but work — no matter whether it entailed happiness or sorrow, security, or insecurity whether it sucked his blood or suckled him. Work was his basic need, the first and the last demand, because he did not come of a family where things were got done at one's behest. Nor was he born in a family which thrived on charity. He came of a family which believed in work and for which work was the only prop and stay. He wanted work alone... work...

And a day came when his problem was solved. Jagpati opened a fuel shed towards the south of the high maidan off the village pond. A weighing scale was hung. The goddess Lakshmi was offered puja and sacred fire burnt at the spot to inaugurate the event. There was no dearth of wood in the locality. The village wizards in the trade helped him buy the first cartload and the wood was unloaded at his stall. The knots were stacked in one corner and piles of splinters were staved off in another. The logs were laid aside for axing and the business started off with two or three cartloads of wood. It was planned that in future he would buy trees and get them hewn. Big plans were hatched... some day from mere fuel selling, the business

would go up and expand to stacking wood for building purposes. As it gained momentum Bachansingh would give up his job and join Jagpati. He felt that the work he had pined for had come about and that he was busy round the clock... he had use for his time. Previously, he had all the time in the world. Now, he could mix with his friends only for a while, could play the husband only for a limited time. Only work could have made up for the futility of the remaining hours — now he was a man with a lot work to do.

He was undoubtedly a very busy man. But as he would sit on the wooden divan, under the thatched shed, with the cash box beside him and look at the heap of fuel wood in front of him, the trunks of trees lying pell-mell and the cut roots rolling before him, a feeling of despondency would abrasively shackle his heart. He would feel as if some discarded monster's body had been cut into pieces and was scattered about. The axe would further rip them and tear them apart into innumerable fibres and then the skeleton and bones would be dried up and carted away in open sale.

He would stare at the yonder palm tree, on the large leaves of which, red-necked eagles fluttered and sat still for hours. Its dark corrugated trunk would hold the air still in its canopy where the lightweight neem leaves would whirl around, tremble and fall down, the ruts of cart-wheels marked on the dust-laden ground would become faintly bright and the monotonous rattling din of the nearby groundnut grinder would fill his ears. Someone would pass by the side path, treading over the slope of the mound and get down to the bed of the pond in whose soiled water scum floated about and pigs raked their muzzles in the slush and mud as they hunted for food...

As the afternoon would recede yielding place to dusky murk, Jagpati would light up a lantern and hang it on to a nail on the thatch-pole. Soon after, Bachansingh would be sighted coming towards him like a dark speck from the hospital side.

By and by Bachansingh's form would grow larger and larger and look enormous. In his presence Jagpati's own existence would seem to fade away.

They would talk about the sales for a while and then leave for home. Reaching home Bachansingh would linger there for some sometime, take rest and chat. Often Bachansingh would stay on for dinner. Chanda would serve them.

Bachansingh would say: "What wonderfully prepared dishes; the spices have been used with such skill as to add to the taste and also to retain the natural flavour of the vegetables. In hotels, it is either all spice or no spice at all. Delicious! Really delicious. What proportions indeed!"

And Chanda would frequently intervene, touching upon the likes and dislikes of her husband: "He does not have his fill unless he gets some ghee with fried onion in his dal."

"If he gets vinegar, he feels he has got everything. There was time when I had no taste for vinegar at all, but now I am such a slave to it that..."

"He does not like paper-thin bread. Now even if I want to prepare thin bread, I find myself incompetent; it is a matter of habit and besides I do not feel like it either..."

But Chanda's eyes would always be on Bachansingh's plate. He would hardly finish his bread when she would quickly serve another; the curry hadn't yet finished when another spoonful was served. And Jagpati would go on munching his food with his head bent down. He would merely ask her for a glass of water and Chanda would look up with a start: "Oh, you hardly had anything!" She would give him a glass of water but feel severely hurt. She knew not why Jagpati's silence pained her so much... but she would console herself with the thought that he was no guest in the house and could ask for anything he wanted — may be he was not hungry.

The meal over, Jagpati would leave for his stall for the night because so far he had not been able to get a watchman. As he would lie on his wooden bed under the thatched shed, all of a sudden his heart would be choked with tears. An assortment of aches would join hands and open up the floodgates of various grinding, bone-breaking pains in him. He could iron it out if it was one single vein twisting and aching, but where could he lay his soothing fingers when every nerve was wrecked with agony?

From the bed, his eyes would wander to the cemented grave by the palm tree, beside which stood the solemn, solitary, thorny babool tree. Each dawn a veiled female, in all veneration would come to offer bela and jasmine flowers at the grave. She would take several rounds of it, bow down and touch the grave with her forehead. Then gravely she would walk a few paces, sharply turn towards the village and disappear from sight. Towards the evening she would return to the spot to light an earthen lamp and incense sticks. While turning to go back, she would fling her stole on her shoulders, causing the lamp flame to flicker and tremble for a while and then go out completely. But by then her steps would have already receded, slowly and wearily at first and then rapid, steady and evenly-paced. She would disappear in the by-lanes and after that into the loneliness of the night. Amidst the babool thorns, on the wind-swept undulating field it would look as if a soul had risen up from the grave and was wandering about in utter solitariness.

Just then the red-neck eagles would hoot out a formidable din and the palm leaves would crackle terrifyingly. A shiver would run through Jagpati's body and the wandering soul, in an effort to survive, would appear to be crouching under the bricks of the grave shaded by the babool tree. Jagpati would pull up his rug to conceal his face, draw up his knees and remain lying with his face buried.

Early next morning the woodcutters would come along with their axes and tightening a rug around his body Jagpati would leave for home.

"Everyday the king used to go for a morning stroll," Ma continued. "One morning, no sooner had he stepped out of the palace than a sweepress who happened to see him there downed her broom and basket and began beating her brow: "O God! the first person I came across this morning is the childless king. I'm afraid I will not get even a crumb of bread today. O, what calamity is in store for me!"

"The king was so much pained that he immediately returned to the palace and ordered his prime minister to fill her house with foodgrains.

"Then discarding his royal attire the king left the palace and made for the woods. That very night the queen had a dream that the next night would bring the fulfilment of her wishes. The queen was very unhappy and she set out in search of the king. She found the inn where the king was staying. Disguising herself as a gypsy woman she spent the night with him. Early next morning, even before the king was awake, she returned to the palace. The king proceeded on his onward journey. 'The king has gone away,' were the words on everyone's lips."

And that day the news that Chanda was expecting a baby burst like the monsoon showers in every nook and corner of the village.

In the parlour of Jamuna goldsmith, the gambling shells came to a dramatic stop. Munshiji set aside his weighing scales, listening to the news with wide-eyed amazement. The sundry goods seller Bansi, heard it as he pulled up the half-down rope from the well and threw off the bucket on the parapet. Tailor master Sudarshan, heard it, staying the wheel of his sewing machine with his palm. Hansraj Punjabi heard it as he rolled up the sleeves of his rumpled blue shirt. And Jagpati's widowed aunt narrated it in secretive whispers but with firm conviction amidst a cluster of women: "Six years of married life... but no child, nothing! Who knows whose sin she is carrying in her belly. And it can't be anybody else's but that fattened compounder's! Why did this ill-omened woman enter our *mohalla* at all? For generations our locality has had the clean reputation of strangers not even having had a glimpse of the shadow of our women. The men here have known none other than the womenfolk of their own households. They do not even know the number of female members of the house next to theirs!" Her face was flushed and all the women present there, looking grave like goddesses and overburdened with the loftiness of their purity, gradually slipped away.

Jagpati had already reached his stall before the news spread around. He too had come to know about it that very day. Lost in thought, he lay on the wooden settee the whole day. He neither looked to the hewing of wood nor paid attention to the sales. He did not even go to his house for the midday meal. When the night

was fairly advanced he got up like a beast out for a hunt. He cracked his fingers and clenched his fists to measure the strength of his arms. The muscles swelled, the vein stood out and a powerful tingle ran through them. He breathed deeply three or four times and started for home with firm steps. He walked over the outstretched field; he was on the semi-*pucca* road; the road ended and he was at the entrance of the *mohalla*. But on entering the darkness of the *mohalla*, he suddenly stiffened as if some invisible hand had caught hold of him and squeezed every drop of his blood out of him, as if some old lips were sucking up all the vital fluid from his veins.

He felt the disdainful blackness of the dark street grow denser and heavier and he felt as if it would stop his breathing and stifle him if he went farther inside it. He turned back but stopped. Gathering himself together and almost stealthily, he managed to reach the doorstep of his courtyard.

On the right-hand side near the kitchen passage the small oil lamp was flickering. Next to it was Chanda sleeping huddled up in a corner with her head against the wall, probably fallen asleep after gazing at the sky for too long. Half of her face was lit up by the light of the lamp and the other half was totally invisible, covered by the black night.

Speechless, he stood looking at her. For the first time he discovered signs of mature womanhood on Chanda's face. Where had the graceful delicacy of her face gone? Where had that taut, touch-me-not look disappear? The face looked puffed up like a flower torn off the bough and brought back to life by being soaked in water.

His glance shifted to her uncovered feet which looked a bit puffed up too. Her heels also looked more rounded and a peculiar dryness was visible around the nails. For a moment Jagpati's heart recoiled with pity for her. He felt like gathering her up in his arms, run his hands all over her body and wiping off all black blemishes from it — sanctifying her once again by the fire of her own breath. He wished to peep into the depths of her eyes and ask, "What curse has forced you Chanda, to leave the abode and come down to this

world in banishment? The curse of barrenness was an eternal one for you, as it is for the nymphs of heaven." At that very moment Chanda stirred and opened her eyes. Finding him there she felt as if she had been stripped naked. With an instinctive feeling of modesty she pulled up her stretched legs and pulled her sari down her knees. Self-composed now, she got up and slipped into the darkness of the kitchen.

Jagpati felt utterly lost and slumped down, his head resting against the sill of the door, his eyes roaming about the room. Many unfamiliar voices seemed to be echoing there, Chanda's voice being one of them too. From everywhere... from every corner of the house, the darkness advanced towards him like a flood... an unknown stagnant silence! A suspense of conflict! Some dynamic force... but erratic... shapeless forms!

"You had better take your food," he heard Chanda say. He got up automatically as though he had been in readiness. He had never ignored her request. But the morsels wouldn't go down his throat. Just then Chanda said unfalteringly: "Tomorrow I am going to my village." As if already aware of her decision, he replied, "all right!"

Chanda said again, "I had written to them long back. My brother will be here tomorrow to fetch me." "It is all right," Jagpati replied in the same trance-like state.

Chanda could no longer hold herself. Helpless, she hid her face between her knees and burst into a fit of sobs.

Jagpati melted for a moment but only to freeze again. His lips quivered and despite his trying to curb the volcano of his anger, he burst out: "What is all this drama? Shameless hussy! You never gave it a thought... when... when... you considered me a corpse in the hospital and..."

"It's all a lie, nothing happened then..." Chanda's voice trembled amidst sobs, "but when you yourself sold me..." and Jagpati's open palm fell on Chanda's temple. It came like a lash of fire. Pressing his palm with the other hand, he got up from the unfinished meal and shot into his room. The whole night long kept himself imprisoned in the dark room.

The next day Chanda went away from the house. Jagpati remained at the woodstall all day and night, lying in desolation, near the pond, by the grave, in the neighbourhood of the same babool and palm trees. But his heart had died within him. He forced himself to stay there somehow. His heart would urge him to flee far away. But such weakness had taken hold of him that his body as well as mind were drained out hollow and in spite of a strong urge he could not bring himself to run away and he remained there lethargic and dazed. Time elapsed. And a day came when his agony became unbearable. He locked up his house and left for the nearby village to get trees out for wood. He felt he had become crippled, maimed for life — a crawling worm which had neither eyes nor ears.

He was at the grove where the trees bought by him were to be chopped. Two lumbermen put the saw on the slender trunk of a tree and the uneasy creaking and whirring sound of sawing the wood filled the air. From another tree rang out the clattering, striking axes of Banne and Shakure. A tremor would rock the whole tree as the axe would fall on its roots. The grove reverberated with a rhythmic din.

Jagpati, sitting on the mud boundary-line of the adjacent field, could feel his body rocking too. 'But when you yourself sold me...' Chanda had said. Was there any truth in the statement? Did the interest on the loan, taken from Bachansingh for launching the stall, amount to mortgaging Chanda? Did that money become a conflagration in whose flames his power of endurance, faith and ideals had melted away like wax?

"Sha... ku...re," someone called from the field to know the way. Shakure's axe stopped and he yelled back: "You will find the wheel-ruts running from the corner of the adjacent field. With a little care you can get the cart across the boundary."

Jagpati's reverie was broken. He fixed his eyes at the pile of fuel wood. He turned and saw that two bullock carts stood there to be loaded. Shakure came near him and said, "One or rather one-and-a-half cartload of wood has already been chopped. Should we bring down that thin tree too?"

Jagpati looked at the tree pointed at by Shakure — its branches laden with green leaves. "Oh no! It is all green... leave it alone," Jagpati said.

"But it is almost dead, it will neither bear fruit nor flowers — it is near-sterile and soon the leaves will wither away," Shakure said, while making a visual survey of the tree with the air of an expert.

"Do as you wish," Jagpati said. He got up, walking across the field for the well for a draught of water.

By the evening the carts stood loaded ready to proceed to the town. Weary and dispirited, amidst the chiming of the cart-bells, his head lowered, and his body covered with clouds of dust rising from the *kachcha* road, Jagpati trailed behind them.

"Years later, the king returned to his kingdom after amassing abundant wealth which he had brought along in a carriage," Mother would add. "He was close by the palace when one of the wheels of his carriage got stuck in a *pathel* bush. Every effort to pull out the wheel failed. A pandit came to the rescue. He said that if a child born on *sakat* day was to bring a betelnut from his own house and touch the carriage with it, the wheel would come unstuck. Two children were playing nearby. No sooner did they hear the call than they jumped on to the scene saying that they were *sakat*-born and they would bring a nut provided they were promised half the wealth as a reward. The king agreed. The children rushed home, brought a betelnut and the carriage began to move. They led the way to their house and stopped in front of the palace.

"The king was wondering as to how the children had come to live in his palace! He went in. The queen was overjoyed to see him.

"But thee king was anxious to know about the boys. She told him that they were his own sons. The king did not believe her. The queen was greatly dismayed."

The carts had reached the stall. Jagpati sat down on the wooden settee dropping with fatigue. Munshiji happened to pass by the road skirting the maidan. He dropped in and began: "I went to a village near your in-law's in connection with the realisation of taxes. There I heard that a son was born to Chanda about a fortnight back." Then as if ignoring the village rumours he added: "Brother

Jagpati! There is justice and mercy in God's kingdom. It may be late but come it must."

Jagpati looked at Munshiji but could not quite make out the target of the arrow shot by him. Sidetracking the insinuation he controverted: "Both injustice and delay are there, Munshiji!"

"Injustice is undoubtedly there... a woman is all frailty and dubiousness! Even the wisest of men have suffered defeat at their hands," Munshiji broke off in the manner of one who had left some top secret unspoken but which could be read from his protruding, round eyes. Jagpati naturally looked askance. There was a charged silence for a minute which was eventually broken by Munshiji's pathetic utterance: "You must have heard about it too!"

"About what?" The word escaped from Jagpati's lips, but he regretted it for he knew that the very next moment Munshiji would blurt out the village rumours.

And as if on cue, Munshiji drew near him and whispered into his ears: "Chanda wants to settle down with somebody else. There is one Madhusudan of the same village. But the child has become a stumbling block. They wish the child were dead so that their way was clear. But nothing happens unless God wills it... they say that he is prepared to accept her irrespective of the child."

Jagpati gasped for breath. His eyes were fixed on Munshiji who continued: "But you can lawfully claim the child... it is not the time to be bashful or unduly considerate!"

"What claim have I to call the child mine, Munshiji! I am overburdened with debt. Without heart and mind, wealth or self-respect — on what basis can I think of rehabilitating my world?" Jagpati sighed and again retreated into his shell.

Munshiji sat down beside him. Night had fallen when Jagpati got up and Munshiji got up too. He put his hand on Jagpati's shoulder and they walked on. Munshiji was now at his doorstep. He stroked Jagpati's back and they parted company. With his head lowered and lost in thought, Jagpati moved on as if nothing had happened to him. But within him lurked a heaviness which seemed to paralyse him and his power of thinking. He was now in front of his aunt's

house. Suddenly a voice came: "Here comes the wretched one! The stigma on the family!"

He raised his eyes and found the women of the *mohalla* congregated there. He quietly slipped away from there.

He had unlocked the house after quite a number of days. He could not make out anything in the darkness of the room and suddenly that night flashed before his mind's eye when he had returned from the hospital with Chanda. The poisonous shaft of his aunt's tongue — 'the childless king was returned from hospital' and the epitaph 'stigma on the family,' recalled his own remark to Chanda — 'you will never have anything' — and finally that night's childlike Chanda!

So Chanda has given birth to a son... how I wish she had brought forth anything but a human child! Why didn't she give birth to something else? It could have been stones, pebbles, anything! Would that she had not known the fulfilment of womanhood! She could just have remained a child — a child as she looked that night! But what is Chanda doing? With me still alive, she is going to settle with someone else! What enormous wickedness I have pushed Chanda into? But she too ought to have thought... after all! But what she proposes to do is also not proper when I am still alive. She prefers to live despite all the hatred that she is facing. Or is it merely to spite me? Does she think of me as a coward and a mean fellow? Otherwise could she not inquire after me even once? If she had borne a child, I could have been informed about it. But what am I to her? A nobody?

A child is the axis which holds together the wheels of existence of a couple to rise above the marsh of carnal love... or else every woman is nothing but a prostitute and every man a worm thriving on the dirt of lust. Is the woman in Chanda no more now? Surely she was a woman but I myself hurled her into the inferno! The child may not be mine but Chanda belonged to me. Oh, if I could once more bring her here... If I could look at her flowerlike lips in the enchanting darkness of the night, could watch her peacefully resting eyelids... could embrace the balmy aroma of her breath...

Oh, the darkness of this night! There is no oil to light the lamp. But why and for whom is the light needed? For Chanda? But he had already sold her off. He had no other asset excepting Chanda on the basis of which a loan could be had. If there had been no loan, there would have been no business... no work... no hewing of trees! And then Shakure's words echoed in his ears. It matters little that it is green; it is almost dead. He was himself a dead tree, capable of bearing neither fruit nor flowers. He was good for nothing. His thoughts had never been able to carry any power of conviction even for himself. He had loved Chanda but had failed to stir the emotion of love in her breast. He had scolded her for taking petty loans but himself had got drowned in them. And today... she wants to settle down elsewhere... forsaking him... he was alone. And a heaviness weighed upon him from all sides, crushing his nerves, tearing open every vein. He somehow managed to enter the house, groping his way into the darkness...

"Thereupon the queen went to the family god's temple," Ma would proceed. "She lived a life of intense denials and devotions to prove her fidelity. The king silently watched her. One day the gods smiled and the princes were turned into new-born babes. The queen's breasts were filled with milk which gushed out in streams and fell into the infants' mouths. The king had proof of her fidelity. He touched her feet saying: 'You are pious! These are my own sons! And he took up the reins of the state again!'"

That night Jagpati abandoned his business and put an end to his life by swallowing opium and oil, for how else could Chanda invoke the gods? But then, Jagpati was not a king but a debtor to Bachansingh, compounder!

"The king did two things," Ma would conclude, "he had built a big temple and named it after his queen. Also, new currency was issued in the name of the elder prince so that the whole kingdom could know the heir-apparent..."

Jagpati left behind two letters — one for Chanda and the other addressed to the law.

To Chanda he wrote, "Chanda! My last wish is that you return home along with the child. My body will be here for a day or two for

postmortem. By then you can come. Chanda! It is not sin but remorse which kills man. I was dead long ago. Do come with the child."

To the law, he wrote "I am aware that my chest will be cut open to decipher the poison I have drunk. Yes, there is poison inside me. I haven't swallowed opium, I have swallowed money and that money contains the venom of debt. This is what has killed me. I wish my body should not be consigned to the flames until Chanda's arrival with her son. The son alone should set fire to the pyre."

When Ma concluded the story, the children sitting around offered flowers.

My story also ends... but...

SUMMER DAYS

The octroi office looks colourful; there are rainbow-like boards on its gate. Painter Syed Ali has decorated them with great skill. And within a short time many shops have sprung across the city, all displaying sign boards. A signboard is the new status symbol. The number of customers suddenly shot up when the first signboard was put up on the shop of Dinanath, the sweet-seller. Then there was a veritable onrush of signboards of new styles and designs except that the first word in every case was "Om" or "Jai Hind" and ended with the invitation: "Taste once", or a challenge: "Reward of hundred rupees if adulteration is proved."

The board of the octroi office is written in three languages. The Chairman is a wise man and it is at his behest that the octroi board proclaims itself in Hindi, Urdu and English. Now leaders who come from distant places to deliver speeches and foreigners on their way to Agra to see Taj can read the language of their choice.

Signboards suffer seasonal changes. The sweet-sellers get them painted before fairs and festivals; stationery stores in July-August, the drapers during *Sahalag* — the months of marriages, and the physicians during inclement weather. The pure gheewallas are the best. They are in red ochre on mud walls. In short, no one can do without signboard. Of their importance, Vaidyaji said: "Even cinemas need posters. Go to the cities, you will find signboards on kerosene oil stores. By using a signboard Sukhdev Babu, the compounder, has become a doctor and now goes about with a black bag."

Ram Charan, who was sitting nearby, introduced a new item "Yesterday Sukhdev Babu bought Budhai's horse-and-ekka."

"Who will drive it," asked the pundit, mediating on a steel chair. "This is how honest folk are robbed," exploded Vaidyaji. "Now he will raise his fees and will wangle tips for his syce as well. These kind of practices bring a bad name to the profession. Does he want to treat his patients or just to show off? In any case the way he uses his new-fangled English instruments will half kill his patients. A *vaidya* does not even need to feel the pulse; he can diagnose a sickness by merely looking at a man's face. And what exactly are the horse-and-*ekka* meant for? You watch out! His syce will soon become the compounder." Vaidyaji broke into a brittle laugh. Then he said: "Medical science has become a *tamasha* with the sons of lawyers and attorneys becoming doctors! It is blood and heredity that counts. The son of a *vaidya* becomes a *vaidya*. He acquires half his knowledge while grinding his herbs. Now take this great man Dhanvantari..." Vaidyaji stopped suddenly and fixed his gaze on a man coming towards the shop.

As the man stepped in, Vaidyaji sensed that he had not come to consult him. Nevertheless he adopted a professional manner. "How are you? All is well?" The man placed a tin of molasses in front of Vaidyaji. "Thakur Saheb will collect this on his way from the market. At about one, or half past one."

"We are closed at that time," Vaidyaji replied sharply. "Doctors' clinics do not remain open all day. We are not grocers." He tried to make up. "If I am not here, Thakur Saheb can pick it up from the neighbour's shop. I will leave it there."

After the man left, Vaidyaji said: "Prohibition has made no difference! The day it was introduced, stills of distilled illicit liquor were set up in many houses. Molasses are sold at the price of ghee. And what about these so-called doctors — their clinics have been turned into bars. Permits are issued to them to use alcohol as medicine. But if we ask for a mere packet of hashish or opium, we are, required to furnish reasons."

"It is a grave matter," said Punditji.

"*Bhai*, only the *vaidya* continue to have a sense of responsibility. All of them have been registered. You see, all manner of riff-raff had started practising medicine. Most *chooranwallas* had become

vaidyas. They have been cleared out. Nowadays only a registered fellow can practise *vaidya*. Now you can only get a license after a proper government enquiry..."

Punditji had taken no interest of what Vaidyaji had said and left without making any comment. Vaidyaji went inside where Chander was busy painting the new signboard. Vaidyaji told him: "The white lead is too thick, add some turpentine." He took out a bottle labelled *Ashokarisht*.

Other bottles contained other chemicals. In one almirah opposite there were big jars with lables of many mixtures; syrups and phials. On the tables were bottles of appetising aperients like Lavan-Bhaskar *chooran*. Besides, there were others not labelled. Only Vaidyaji knew their contents.

After mixing turpentine oil in the paint, Chander began to paint: Prof. Kaviraj Nityanand Tiwari. Vaidyaji had already written in the first line: Shri Dhanvantari Aushadhalaya. The letters of white lead looked like bits of pasted cotton wool. Noticing a vacant spot above, Vaidyaji ordered: "White Jai Hind on top, and in the space below, draw a bottle of Drakshasav on one side and a mortar on the other..."

Chander was getting bored with the job. "A painter would have done the job very nicely; I don't get the proper finish..." He wiped the beads of sweat off his forehead and put the brush aside.

"The painter wants five rupees. Five rupees for two lines! Now, with our own honest labour this signboard has cost ten or twelve annas. And the paint was given by a patient. That fellow who paints for the electric company had indigestion. I gave him two doses free; in return he gave me some paint and varnish. We still have enough for two chairs. Later on, I will add a shade of red to the board. A tricolour margin will look nice wouldn't it?" Vaidyaji's question was more of a statement.

Chander felt very hot. It was getting on to midday. The hot wind got hotter and dustier. But Chander could not say no to Vaidyaji.

Meanwhile, Vaidyaji turned to his ledgers. To keep out the heat, he closed one door. Chander asked: "What are all these, Vaidyaji?"

Vaidyaji replied: "It is better to do some work than to sit idle. These new scribes know nothing about their work. Everyday they are rebuked by the Qanungo or the Naib Saheb. So they farm out their work. Where can you find those cunning *patwaris* of the good old days, who had the law at the tip of their tongue? The poor fellows have lost their jobs. But if you want to know the truth, all the work is still done by the old *patwaris*. The new scribes have to part with most of their salaries in getting this work done. They too have their bellies to fill. So they fleece the peasants. Some work is passed on to me. It is only filling in the registers."

The road outside was deserted. The octroi clerks had gone home. *Khas* screens were being sprayed. The hot wind brought with it the rustling sound of a distant peepal. A man peeped in. Vaidyaji stopped talking, sized up the newcomer and said: "I have ordered a board from Agra. This will do till the new one is delivered. I hardly have the time to look after these things." Then he turned to the man, "*Bhai*, what is the matter?"

"I need a medical certificate. I am a labourer at Kosama station," the man said.

"From when to when," demanded Vaidyaji.

"I came here fifteen days ago. I want to stay another week."

After swift calculation Vaidyaji said, "I will give you an authorised certificate with the registered number of the government but it will cost you four rupees." He noticed the look of dismay on the other's face and added, "If you don't want a certificate for the previous days, it will cost you only two rupees."

The labourer looked crestfallen. But Vaidyaji was even more distressed. The labourer said, "Sobran Singh sent me to you." The way he said this seemed as though the certificate was required for Sobran Singh and not for himself. But Vaidyaji capped him with, "I guessed so. I never give a certificate without someone's recommendation. You see, it's a matter of my reputation. How do I know how you spent all these days? I am taking a risk just on faith... I will have to back-date your name under each date after that. Only then will the job be complete. It is not very simple." He looked towards Chander for support. Chander put in: "How would

Vaidyaji know whether you were ill or committing robbery? After all, this is government business."

"No doctor in the world would give you a certificate for less than five rupees," said Vaidyaji pushing away the register "I don't have a single minute to spare. I have to ignore my patients, to prepare these cash registers for the government. The name, disease and fee taken from every patient... your name will also be enrolled in it! Now tell me, what is more important: to attend to my patients, or to get involved in this business of medical certificates — just for the sake of a few rupees?" He closed the register and started probing his ear with the pen.

The labourer was quiet for a minute. Then, seeing Vaidyaji still busy probing his ear, he left the shop. Vaidyaji realised his mistake. He called out, "Listen, convey my regards to Thakur Sobran Singh... I hope his children are fine?"

"Yes, they are fine," the labourer replied as he paused for a moment. Vaidyaji said loudly to Chander, "Thakur Sobran Singh travels through cities and villages to come to me for treatment. I, too am always ready to help him." Chander asked: "Has he gone?"

"He'll loiter for a while and come back," replied Vaidyaji. "Doctors and lawyers of the villages have the same traits. If Sobran Singh has suggested my name to him, he will certainly come back. The villagers are very reluctant to open their purses. This fellow will sit down somewhere and think. Then he will return."

"What if he goes to someone else?" asked Chander. "No, he will not." Looking towards the board he exclaimed. "*Vah, Bhai* Chander Babu! The signboard is a beauty. If I gave five rupees to the painter. I would have had to realise it from one of the patients. *Ekka*, horse and such expenses! It's all the same. Either you go straight, or choose a roundabout way. A boat painted by Syed Ali does not cure patients. It is a matter of one's understanding." He laughed at his own wit.

Just then another man arrived. He was suffering from jaundice. Vaidyaji heaved a sigh of relief. He went in and brought back a talisman. Tying it to the man's arm he said, "Now, watch. You will see its magic within twenty-five days." The man offered a few annas,

which Vaidyaji dropped in his pocket. When the patient left he said: "My father had this knowledge. The books he wrote are still with me. I often think of copying them out once again. They are the fruit of great experience. It's a matter of faith. A man can be cured by a pinch of dust. What about this homoeopathy? A pill of sugar! It depends on what you believe."

"Time to close the dispensary. Won't you go home for your meal," asked Chander.

"You go, I will come after five-ten minutes." Vaidyaji pulled the registers of the *tehsil* before him. With the door of the dispensary half-closed, he settled down to his work.

Bachanlal, the shopkeeper next door, closed his shop and asked Vaidyaji: "Didn't you go home, for your meal?"

"I have some important work to attend to. Shall leave after some time," Vaidyaji replied. Placing a mat on the floor, he picked up the papers and the register from the table and spread them on the ground. It was terribly hot. The sweat poured down. He soon lost his will to work. He got up, dusted the old phials and put them in order. He peeped out of the door and saw a few passers-by. He felt better. He straightened the wire of the board and nailed it to the shop front. Dhanvantari Aushadhalaya now hung before the shop like a talisman around the neck of his shop. After a while he drank a glass full of water, drew up his dhoti and settled down to the work.

The sound of footsteps reached his ears. He looked up with worried eyes.

"Didn't you go home, Vaidyaji?" A shopkeeper asked, on his way home.

"I was just thinking about it. I have some work to finish," Vaidyaji said and reclined against the wall. He removed his shirt. The heat made him drowsy. He made himself a pillow of the registers and fell asleep.

He was startled out of his sleep. Bachanlal had come back.

"Oh, you are still here," he remarked. Vaidyaji started fanning himself with great vigour. Bachanlal asked, "Are you waiting for someone, Vaidyaji?"

"Yes, a patient told me he would come, a labourer from a distant town... Hasn't come yet." Vaidyaji saw Bachanlal go away. Breaking his sentence in the middle, he began to wipe off his sweat.

THE QUEST

She gently pushed at the door. It was bolted from inside. They must have closed it after she fell asleep. Last night, while lying awake in bed, she had heard sounds coming from that room and seen a bar of light filtering through the chink of its door, in which the billowing cigarette smoke had kept weaving variegated patterns. For a long time she lay in bed watching those patterns.

Opening her door she came out on to the verandah and gave a gentle push at the other door. It was no longer locked. Silently she went to the stairs. The door opening into the street was ajar. She became apprehensive. She knew that Mummy was swamped with work. Could she have gone so early in the morning without having a word with her?

She again came on to the verandah and pushed open the door. There were registers lying scattered on the carpet and red and blue inkpots, pen holders, red and blue pencils and a box of carbon papers. A coffee cup lay on one side, containing burnt matches and cigarette stubs.

Mummy must have been tired — the way she was sleeping in her bed. Her hairpins were lying near the head of the bed and there was a hollow in the pillow on her left. The tea-poy by the bedside bore marks of a cigarette having been stubbed out. A half-burnt cigarette was lying on the floor.

Mummy's face looked innocent in sleep. It was fresh and clean the way it looked after she had had a wash. While taking tea, she would keep looking at Mummy's face; it reminded her of a lotus flower drenched in dew. What was that something special in Mummy's face that she could not take her eyes off?

Coming back to her room she waited for Mummy to wake up. After a short while she heard her bolting the door opening on to the verandah and then saw her standing at her door. She didn't come directly to Sumi's room but kept standing where she was. Then she called out to her: "Sumi, are you awake?" and walking through her room disappeared into the bathroom. With her came a whiff of cold breeze and a mild fragrance pervaded Sumi's room.

Sumi got the tea ready.

"I may have to go out for two days," Mummy said in a matter-of-fact voice, sitting down at the table. "A part of the grant has remained unutilized. It'll lapse if we don't purchase scientific equipment for the laboratory before the close of the financial year." The end of Mummy's sari, more creased than on other mornings, falling from her shoulder was wrapped round her shapely, marble-white arms. Her eyes seemed to be brooding, as if she was preoccupied with some serious thought.

"I'll manage in your absence," Sumi said. "There'll be no trouble." She made another cup of tea and pushed it towards Mummy.

"I'll ask a maid-servant from the college hostel to sleep here at night," Mummy said. "It's only a matter of two days."

"It's no problem," Sumi said, reconciling herself to the new situation. "As it is, I don't return from the office before six."

"Our house is quite safe that way," Mummy said in a reassuring tone. "There's nothing to fear."

They started getting ready to go to their work. Sumi saw that Mummy was intently examining a blouse, undecided about what to wear. She put it back in the wardrobe and took out another with sleeves. Usually she wore sleeveless blouses in which her shapely arms showed to great advantage, arousing Sumi's envy. The one she had selected looked a bit odd and did not go well with her sari.

Then she went up to the dressing table and started applying a base cream on her arm. Sumi had noticed a blue spot under her arm. Perhaps she wanted to hide it from Sumi.

For a moment. Mummy suddenly looked aged but Sumi decided to take no notice of it. Mummy moved into the balcony to wait for the bus in which she rode to the college along with her students.

Sumi watched Mummy standing in the balcony. When she was a small girl she thought Mummy the most beautiful woman in the world. She had a shapely figure and well-chiselled features. Always fresh, her freshness seemed to have kept pace with her years. No friend of hers took Mummy for her mother; they looked like sisters. She was still soft and supple like Sumi and had taken good care of her health. Her body exuded a faint smell which Sumi found very pleasing.

Once a month the smell became so pronounced that on one pretext or the other Sumi would rest her head against her shoulder to savour the smell to the full. The smell pervaded the two-room apartment, as if a musk deer was passing through a narrow valley. After two or three days the smell would start losing its loud note and then get subdued.

Sumi watched Mummy climbing into the bus and then returned to her room. Her loneliness seemed to have sharpened her responsibilities of housekeeping. Going into Mummy's room she began to tidy up her things. She collected the registers and note books and piled them up neatly on a small table. While making Mummy's bed and covering it with a bedspread she felt vaguely uncomfortable, as if she had no right to touch Mummy's things. Her eyes travelled to a photograph resting on the mantelpiece. Mummy and Papa were standing together, with her sitting on a settee between them. She picked up the photograph and carried it to her room and then put another photograph in Mummy's room, showing the sea in storm and seagulls wheeling in the sky.

She lost all sense of time. Opening Papa's box she took out his personal diary in which he used to record personal events, addresses of relatives, and the like. She turned the pages of the diary. He had recorded Mummy's date of birth and her own too. It came to her as a surprise. Mummy was only nineteen years older than her. She was twenty and Mummy thirty-nine.

After that they never celebrated Mummy's birthday. How forlorn Mummy must have felt. It was eight years ago but it seemed as if Papa had gone out of the room only a short while ago. The fact of his death had now got woven into the fabric of the past. People pass on, leaving behind faint echoes of their utterances. But Papa was still very much with her though his utterances had got lost in the limbo of memory. As she looked at his picture he seemed to be wavering, as if he was anxious to step out of the house. Was it correct on his part to linger in the house for eight long years when he had lost the right to remain there? She kept gazing at him for a long time. He sat mute, just staring back at her, wordlessly.

"Mummy, you must go out for a stroll in the evening," Sumi said. "Tied down to a dead routine you're killing yourself with work." Her own voice sounded so distant to her.

Mummy looked at her intently. "It'll also give me an opportunity to go out," Sumi added quickly, trying not to be misunderstood. "I get tired of sitting at home."

A faint smile played across Mummy's lips. "Let's go to a picture tonight," she said. "We'll eat something on the way."

Sumi accepted the suggestion with alacrity. Mummy kept rummaging through her wardrobe, unable to decide which sari to wear.

"Try this one, Mummy," Sumi said, offering her one of her own. "It will look nice on you."

After a moment's hesitation Mummy took the sari from Sumi. She looked so chic in it.

While going out Sumi switched off the lights and locked the doors.

Mummy was suddenly reminded of her electricity bill. "We have not paid the bill," she said, while going downstairs.

"I'll take care of it tomorrow," Sumi said.

By and by she had taken upon herself the running of the house. Bills and cash memos lay piled up on her table; she kept the dhobi book in her almirah and the milk coupons in her handbag. Her saris and blouses got mixed up with Mummy's clothes. In the

morning when Mummy was getting ready she would offer her own things to wear.

"Mummy, remove that shawl of yours and wear my cardigan."

"Don't be silly, Sumi," Mummy said in mock anger. "What'll you wear?"

"I've my coat."

"That old one?"

"Clothes don't get old so quickly, Mummy. I had it dry-cleaned. It looks as good as new."

"You seem to have a keen eye," Mummy patted her cheek lovingly.

That evening when she returned home she again found registers and note books scattered in Mummy's room. In a tray lay empty tea cups, and burnt matches and cigarette ends in another plate. Standing in the balcony, Mummy was looking below, as if she was trying to spot someone in the crowded street.

"How about some tea, Mummy?"

Mummy looked at Sumi, startled. "When did you come," she asked. "And you've already prepared the tea. I'm feeling tired, child. I've so much work to do at the college. I don't have a single free period. The demonstrator too is on leave." Talking in snatches, she came into Sumi's room.

There was a round mark on her forehead made with red ink. The ink had crinkled round the edges and shone like threads of gold. Mummy was looking beautiful but Sumi didn't want to draw her attention to that mark for fear of upsetting her.

"I've a lot of study to do," Sumi said in a listless voice.

"I'll help you."

"No, it's not your kind of studies. They're opening one more Exchange — it's for code messages. They've started a class for it. I've to go over the lesson tonight."

"Then get on with your studies. I'll cook the meal."

"I'm not hungry. Just prepare soup and some fried slices to go with it. That'll do for me."

"Well..." Mummy rose to go.

A silence fell over the room. Their rooms were like two worlds apart. But Papa was still living in her world. Perhaps Mummy wished to talk with him. Or, may be she thought that if she went away from her room, life would become intolerable for Papa and he would follow her silently on tiptoe.

Going back to her room, Mummy had started rummaging through old papers and knick-knacks. She came upon a bunch of Papa's old letters among them.

After a while she saw Mummy going into the bathroom. When she returned Sumi found that she was looking fresh and spruced up. The ink mark had disappeared from her forehead.

"Sumi, help me shift that almirah from there," she said. "Some papers have fallen behind the almirah. Lend me a hand, child."

When they shifted the almirah a sheaf of papers fell on the floor. And that walking stick, which Papa had bought in the hills when he had sprained his ankle. Dust rose from the papers. Mummy started coughing.

"Mummy, why have you collected all this junk in your room?" Sumi said. "Don't you feel stifled? I'll put some of the things in that almirah in the stairs."

Mummy didn't object. They retrieved the things and arranged them in the almirah.

"I'll keep the walking stick in my room," Sumi said.

Her request seemed to have struck a discordant note. Mummy gave her a sharp look. "It's to drive away the cat," Sumi explained. "She sneaks into my room at night."

Papa's old things, whatever remained of them, were frequently moved from one place to another. They never seemed to find a permanent repository. After three days Sumi deposited the things on a wooden board under her table. But while cleaning the room they fell down on the floor. The files were too big to be fitted into the almirah. At last she tied them together in a bundle and again shoved them under her bed. Papa was still biding his time in her room.

That day Mummy had said that she would go by the night train and return on the third day. "I've fixed up with a maid-servant of the college hostel," she told her. "She'll stay with you at night."

"At what time does your train leave?"

"At five past eight."

"Will the peon come?" No sooner did she utter these words, she realised her mistake. "I'll help pack your box," she said.

"It's only a matter of two days. I don't have to carry many things."

Mummy started packing her suitcase. Packing over, she went away to change. As Sumi opened the suitcase to put in some handkerchiefs she saw a small flat packet in a pocket of the suitcase. As if galvanized, she banged the lid down and left the handkerchiefs on top of the suitcase.

Mummy came back after changing her sari. A smell was wafting from her body. Sumi realised that that smell had been there for the last three days. At seven-thirty a taxi stopped outside their house and blew its horn. Mummy suddenly got unnerved. Hurriedly picking up her suitcase she proceeded towards the stairs. By then the Sardar taxi driver had come up the stairs. Sumi pushed the hold-all towards him and tried to take away the suitcase from Mummy. "No, let me carry it," Mummy said in an even voice.

Then she quickly climbed the stairs. Sumi went out on to the balcony. Mummy waved to her from the taxi. As the taxi started, Sumi saw a burning cigarette stub falling on the road from the other window of the taxi. Her eyes remained glued to it till it was extinguished.

The equipment had come in a number of packing cases. Mummy had come late at night and the packing cases were unloaded at her apartment. She looked pleased. "See what a huge lot of equipment I've brought," she said cheerfully. "No other college laboratory can boast of so many scientific instruments."

She opened her hold-all to take out her dirty clothes. First she gave Sumi the handkerchiefs. "I've not lost a single one," she said. "There are five of them here. One is in my purse. Right?"

A faint fragrance wafted from the cream coloured handkerchiefs. A woollen sock came out entangled in a sari. Mummy swiftly pushed it back into the hold-all. "We'll sort out the clothes in the morning when the *dhobi* calls," she said and pushed the hold-all under the bed.

A wave of water seemed to have surged between them, though they were standing secure like the banks holding back the water.

Sometimes Mummy got flustered on seeing Sumi as if Papa had suddenly returned. And Sumi, when she beheld Mummy in that condition, got upset as if Papa were gone. But Papa neither came nor went. He was only biding his time there.

At last, one day Sumi mustered all her courage. "Mummy," she said. "My office is too far from here. When you go to live in the college cottage in a month or two, as you expect to, my office will become still more distant. A room is vacant in the Working Girl's Hostel. If you don't mind, I would like to live there."

Mummy suddenly became grave and looked intently at Sumi. But there was no trace of bitterness on Sumi's face. Her eyes betrayed no emotion, her voice made no complaint.

"You won't be comfortable there," Mummy said in a voice saturated with maternal affection.

"Then I'll run back home," Sumi said. "Your doors are always open for me."

Sumi shifted to the hostel on the first of the month. Mummy accompanied her, bought her a lot of things on the way, deluged her with advice, and helped her to settle down in her new room. In the beginning, she visited her every evening. Then she started calling her on the phone. After that the intervals between visits became longer.

Good that Papa had come with Sumi. Now she didn't feel sorry about him. He was no longer at Mummy's mercy. She had freed him from her bondage. But she didn't feel at home in the midst of the other inmates of the hostel; she felt as if her own life had also come to a stop in mid-course like Papa's.

One day, feeling lonely, she took out Papa's old papers. As she picked up his diary it fell open at the page where he had noted

down Mummy's date of birth. Alongside, he had written down a few sentences in his sweet, affectionate tone, ending with a promise that he would try to keep her happy as long as he lived. That was eleven years ago, Sumi felt consoled. She had tried to fulfil Papa's wishes: to keep Mummy happy. In three days Mummy would be forty.

On Mummy's birthday she called on her early in the morning with a bouquet of narcissus flowers. While standing outside the house she was caught in a doubt. Was she calling too early? Should she have come at all? Mummy may even take her amiss. She should have phoned her up before coming. Well, now there was no going back.

She gently knocked at the door and waited. Presently she heard the faint shuffling of Mummy's feet. When the door opened she threw her arms round Mummy and then gave her the flowers.

Mummy looked at the flowers and then at Sumi.

"Your Papa also used to bring these flowers," she said in a tremulous voice.

Regaining her composure, she shuffled back into the kitchen and came back with the tea things on a tray. She made a cup and placed it before Sumi and then made one for herself. They looked at each other as if from across two different worlds. "Sumi, I hope you don't have any trouble at the hostel," she said at last in a strained voice.

"No, Mummy, except that I feel lonely at times."

"I also feel the same way," Mummy said. Then she looked away and said in a blurred voice, "I wish I could fix a nice breakfast for you. But there's nothing in the house."

"Hasn't the egg-seller called yet?"

"No, I've stopped buying eggs." Her eyes became dim with tears and she again looked away. Then she rose, gave a faint laugh and finding nothing for support started looking at the calendar resting on the table.

"Oh, I've not even changed the date," she said. "Funny, isn't it? I'm getting forgetful."

Sumi looked at her mother, without uttering a word. Her tongue seemed to have failed her. She felt that before she went away she would only be able to ask: "Mummy, what's the time now?"

THAT WHICH REMAINS UNSAID

How alien one can be to one's own self! This thought keeps haunting me all the time, inevitably bringing to my kind Sudarshana's name. And this is how Sudarshana's name is linked with my thoughts. She had said to me one day, "Chander, these memories can lead us nowhere; they can only bring us to a dead end. There is something lying dormant within me about which I cannot talk to anybody. It makes me feel so lonely and forlorn."

"Not even me? You can't even talk to me about it?"

"If lies can make you happy I can spin out any number of lies. But the truth is that a stage comes in one's life where one can't shed one's reserve. In everybody there is something which always remains unsaid. It brooks no exception."

A shadow had swam across her eyes and she kept looking at the billowing dust storm through the window.

I had sat there watching her wordlessly. The situation was such. The whole house was enveloped in layers and layers of gloom. In the room next to ours sat Sudarshana's husband, Mahinder.

In the morning when all of us had sat down for tea, Mahinder had sat silent as if confined within his shell. Not he alone, all of us were silent. Perhaps this was a way to hide our feelings. It was a sad occasion. We had assembled at Sudarshana's father's death. But for that I would not have made his trip, nor would have Sudarshana's husband, Mahinder. We sat wrapped in silence, looking so helpless and lost — the three of us who knew each other so well and yet hated each other under our skin, so to say. We were feeling so

miserable that we could not take refuge even behind an inconsequential conversation.

In these five years since Sudarshana had left Mahinder, I had not met him even once. In fact the question of meeting him did not arise. All the time Mahinder had a sneaking suspicion that it was on account of me that Sudarshana had left him, that I was responsible for her desertion.

Whenever I thought over the matter, how I wished it had been true. It would have, no doubt, brought me a bad name for some time but it would have wiped out the sadness from Sudarshana's eyes for good.

When Mahinder came at Sudarshana's father's death and my visit also coincided with his visit both of us felt as if we had come to beg for something from her. As if the condolence was only an excuse to serve as a peg to hang something from. I tried to play down my feelings for her, lest such exhibition of sympathy should come to have a false ring about it. When her father's funeral pyre was lit I made a valiant effort to hold back my tears.

Clad in a white sari, the *pallu* of her sari stuffed in her mouth, Sudarshana was sitting on a brick platform under a peepul tree, looking ahead of her with an abstracted gaze. Her eyes had dried up and the blackness seemed to have drained out from her pupils. Tender, green shoots had sprouted on the peepul tree and the shadows of its silken leaves were falling on her face but she sat alone oblivious of everything around her, even of our presence which deterred both of us from going to her to console her.

Mahinder was sitting on a bench at some distance from the burning pyre and I was sitting near a heap of stones. Mahinder's face glowed in the flames leaping up from the pyre.

The people at the funeral must have marked the incongruity of the situation. On this sad occasion of death, Mahinder should have been by Sudarshana's side. Wasn't she his wife? True, they had separated five years back. But what of that? Such considerations were supposed to be extraneous to such moments.

As for myself, although I had a strong urge to do so, I could not bring myself to place my hand on her shoulder and utter a few

words of solace, "Sudarshana, I can understand your grief. Your father is gone. But I'm still here. Take heart..."

But nothing of the kind happened. The pyre kept burning, making a crackling sound. The five priests performed the usual rites while we kept gazing at the burning faggots of wood turning into ashes. Then we came away silently, without exchanging a word with one another on the way. The dust storm was still blowing.

The next day, when the question of collecting the ashes of the dead came up they said that in such matters the son-in-law could take the place of a son. Sudarshana had not revealed her mind by saying yes or no. Instead, she had herself gone to the cremation ground with the servant to collect the ashes.

After three days I found it irksome to prolong my stay there. Perhaps Mahinder was also feeling the same way. I saw Sudarshana sitting in a chair in the verandah, her face steeped in gloom. I thought it was just the opportunity for me to tell her that I would be leaving by the night train, when I saw Mahinder coming in her direction and I turned away without meeting her.

As Mahinder came up, she got up from her chair. "I shall be leaving tomorrow morning," he said.

"Why, where's the hurry?" Sudarshana said. "Won't you stay for another day?"

I got a jolt. So Sudarshana wanted Mahinder to stay back. It was quite within the pale of possibility that they may come to some understanding. Yes, it was certain to end up that way. It seemed so inevitable. She may give out the house on rent or she may lock it up and go away with Mahinder... And then they may start living together again. For a moment I felt that it would be all to the good. What other alternative did she have anyway? Her father, her main prop in life, was gone. It was because of her father that she had taken such a momentous step in life. And now she was all alone in the world. What else could she do?

Finding no excuse to stay on, I said gingerly, "Sudarshana, I want to leave by the night train."

"Why tonight? Can't you stay for another day or two?"

I found myself in a quandary. I thought that being under a dark cloud of trouble she had been caught in a whirlpool of worse calamity and found herself so broken from within that she wanted to hold someone's hand for help. But whose hand?

Both of us stayed back, aloof from each other, ploughing our lonely furrow.

Under that roof we kept wallowing in our own memories which made our stay still more oppressive. It was the same house where I used to spend hours together in Sudarshana's company, its walls being witness to our first love. That part of the wall was still the same where Sudarshana had stood resting her back against it and where I had folded her in my arms — the very first time. Sudarshana had said in a shy voice: "These arms will always stay round my waist as they are now, won't they?" I stood there smiling at her.

Then everything changed, slowly, imperceptibly. One day I saw Mahinder coming within my ken and the transformation in the house was complete. The attitude of the inmates of the house towards me had undergone a marked change. I felt so humiliated in visiting them. Now when I think of those things it makes me laugh. Even so, sometimes the whole thing rankles in my mind.

Our paths had changed and I felt that Sudarshana and I had almost relegated each other to the back of our minds. Perhaps we had consoled ourselves by thinking that it was adolescent love and was bound to peter out one day in this manner.

Sudarshana was very happy with her husband and when she had met me with her husband for the first time a faint glimmer of recognition had shone in her eyes. But there was a gleam of triumph in Mahinder's eyes. I had felt terribly defeated.

"We often talk about you in our house," Mahinder had said shaking hands with me. "For that matter we can't have enough of talking. You know how talkative both of us are." He had smiled. With a show of bonhomie I had slurred over his remark but my eyes had questioned Sudarshana. What did she mean by insulting me in this manner? Hadn't she noted the sarcasm in her husband's remark? She had of course caught the sting in Mahinder's voice but

by making light of it she had all the more deepened the wound. "We always say such nice things about you," she had said.

"What do you mean by nice things?" I said forcing a laugh. But I was denied a reply. Sudarshana and Mahinder were in a hurry to go somewhere.

It had indeed hurt my feelings but at the same time I was pleased that they were happy with each other.

Off and on I kept getting news of them — about their success, about their having set up a beautiful home. And then that they had purchased a car and had engaged three domestics to run the house. I used to receive long letters from them dwelling at length on their holiday sojourns. They sent me picture postcards from various places with a line or two scribbled on them. There were gift parcels too.

It was during those days that Sudarshana had come home to her father. I didn't know the reason though. She had just come without giving any information in advance. We had been together only for a short while when I realized that she looked troubled. Perhaps she had not been able to suppress her distress.

"Men can be so suspicious," she said in a faint voice.

"Why?"

I don't know under what compulsion she opened out to me. "Chander, I can't speak to anyone about it at home," she said in a troubled voice. "But I've no hesitation in telling you about it. I don't have any kind of trouble in a manner of speaking but the thought keeps weighing on my mind that my life has come to a dead end."

"What's the matter with you, Sudarshana? Tell me, it may lighten the burden of your heart," I said.

"It's nothing, really. Only a trifling matter. One day we were sitting in our hotel room, going over our past, my head resting on his chest and his hand over my shoulder. He told me a story of his past love which I heard with great relish. I was full of pride that I had won him over. Then he asked me in a tender voice, 'Barshi, you must have also loved someone.' "

"I could tell him a lie. It was so easy for me to do so. But I could see that he had told his story truthfully without adding frills to it. He seemed to be in a mood to make a clean breast of it. It was then that I had told him about you. I told him that you were gone on me and that was the reason that you had not married till now. I was deriving a strange satisfaction from the thought that you still remembered me.

"He probed me further and managed to unearth some more facts about us. Carried away by my ardour, I held back nothing. After a while I felt that an unknown 'third person' had come between us.

"I don't know when my head slipped from his chest and when his arm fell away from my back. Without being aware of it, we had moved away from each other's physical proximity.

"From that time on that 'third man' always stood between us. It is really not you, if I may say so. Only that 'third man' sometimes assumes your face and sometimes my husband thinks that the 'third man' passes under your name.

"And this shadow always stays so close to me." Sudarshana's eyes filled with tears.

"Does this shadow keep tormenting you?"

"The whole trouble is that we are so nice to each other, without giving any cause for complaint. But now we cannot talk with each other freely, without any sense of inhibition. If my words are charged with emotion he immediately starts suspecting something. My every word, my every feeling can assume a different meaning for him. I don't know how long we can carry on like this."

Just these words and no more but they were enough to fill my mind with apprehension. It seemed that it would not be long before they reached the breaking point. It had made me sad. Carefully watching my words I said, "I was all along under the impression that you were very happy. But what you have told me has given me a severe jolt. But, Sudarshana, I'm in no position to give you any advice, even knowing that you are passing through a crisis. It is given to each individual to find equanimity of mind in his or

her own way. One is the best judge of one's own life, of its ins and outs."

"Chander, it seems the tide has receded, leaving only snails and foam on the wet shore. In course of time even this wet shore will become dry, leaving only fissures behind."

"Sudarshana, there's little that I can do for you except feeling bad about the whole thing and gnawing out at my own heart in frustration. I am reduced to a nonentity so far as you are concerned."

"How you talk! It was my fate that brought me from there. I tried to impart a new meaning to my fate and thus tried to deceive it and it has now recoiled against me." Sudarshana's eyes brimmed over with tears. She spread out her palms before me and said, "Now tell me what more is written on them?"

"Sudarshana, there is nothing written on them."

"Should I go back? What else can I do?"

"Find a job somewhere. It will divert your mind and help you to forget your past. Or at least take the sting out of your life."

Sudarshana had laughed. "I know it," she said. "But that's hardly a solution. Listen, Chander, tell me some other way out." She had said it in a most helpless tone. But I had nothing to tell her.

While parting from her I had only said, "Off and on write to me about yourself — about how you are getting along in life."

She had gone back. Another phase of happiness followed. She regularly wrote home. But now the letters were short as if she was making a futile effort to recapture her past happiness.

The tide had turned again... Five years ago she had returned to her father, never to go back. In the beginning her father had told everyone that Mahinder had gone abroad for a year to get some professional training, leaving Sudarshana behind under his care. But when four years passed and Mahinder did not return people started making conjectures and came to know what the reality was.

But I had found the situation much too unsavoury for my liking. Once I came specially with the intention of meeting Sudarshana and finding out what was behind all this. After going round and

round I had at last come to the point and had asked her the reason for leaving Mahinder.

Perhaps by that time she had reconciled herself to the situation. She gave a faint smile and said: "There's no special reason. You may take it that both of us are too good to make things difficult for each other. But our agony is such that we cannot share it with each other on a give-and-take basis." She took out her hairpins from her coiffure and with one of the pins kept drawing lines on the bare ground of the lawn. The whole place looked so sombre and oppressive. The evening haze was deepening and the trees stood listlessly still. Darkness was fast descending over the verandah. Switching on the verandah light, Sudarshana's father went in. I don't know how Sudarshana had felt about the whole thing. "It's getting dark," she had said in a faint voice. "Let's move into the verandah."

It must have been quite an ordeal for Sudarshana to spend those five years for there was no one else in the house except her father. Father and daughter — they were the only two persons living under that roof.

The news of her father's death left me completely bewildered. How would Sudarshana cope with the situation? How was it all going to end up with her? Where would she go? Back to Mahinder? Was there another way out for that matter? I did not expect Mahinder to come. But when I reached he was very much there. At the cremation I saw them in a new light which gave me a faint inkling of what was coming. She did not encourage Mahinder to actively associate himself with the rites. Perhaps she was watching whether he would extend his helping hand to pull her out of her narrow orbit of loneliness. That afternoon when Sudarshana and I were sitting in the room adjoining Mahinder's, I asked her: "When are you going?"

"Going where?"

I had smiled in reply. She had also smiled and then she had suddenly turned sad. "What's the difference between here and there?" she had said. "Here the trouble is that time is taking its toll

of me and there it would be self-annihilation by slow degrees. The end is the same."

"You may be right. But you have to do something about it. Perhaps Mahinder has come just for this purpose."

"And with what purpose have you come?"

A silence intervened between us. She sat there looking through the window at the billowing dust storm. Beads of perspiration appeared on her forehead and her hair stuck against them. Her breathing had become laboured.

At last breaking the silence she said: "Look, one does not tell one everything. One can't live one's life so openly. One has to nurse some beautiful illusions!"

The more I tried to explain the more difficult she became. The oppressive afternoon at last spent itself out. Mahinder had remained confined to his room throughout the evening.

He had to leave the next morning. After finishing my dinner I retired to my room. At night sounds came from Mahinder's room — snatches of talk, sobs followed by long spells of silence. It was a night full of suspense and strain.

But everything was quiet and tranquil in the morning. As I came out of the bathroom, I saw Sudarshana emerging from Mahinder's room and disappearing into her own. She looked so spent out and unkempt. After Mahinder left by the ten o'clock train I found myself in an awkward situation. I felt like asking Sudarshana what did she mean by covering up her tribulations behind a false facade of exhibitionism? Did she really get pleasure out of it? I had a feeling that she would come to me in the same dishevelled condition and looking a picture of woe.

At one o'clock there was a knock at my door. As I came to the door I saw Sudarshana standing before me nicely dressed and spruced up and looking exactly as she did ten years ago. It appeared as though time had retraced its steps and a new chapter of life was going to start from that point onwards — the same point from where her life had taken a new turn.

"Let's go. We shall eat outside. Get ready quickly."

While eating we had rambled over all those things for which both of us bore an affinity. What would have happened if we had been living together? What values of life would have welded us together? ... And then shadows of love had descended in her eyes as if something was taking shape.

Returning home in the afternoon we had forgotten that only a few days ago shadows of death had lingered there and everything was overshadowed by pity and compassion.

In the evening, after I had packed my things to leave I still hoped that Sudarshana would come in and remonstrate with me not to go. But nothing like it happened. She came in when I had just time enough to catch the train. "I'll come with you to see you off at the station," she said.

On the way to the station, after much hesitation I forced the words out, "Sudarshana, just give it a thought, dear," I said. "I'm not thinking of myself but..."

"Listen, Chander, I think nothing is going to happen now. It's all futile. I feel so inadequate within myself. I lack the will to accept anything."

"Sudarshana, come out with everything that's weighing on your mind. Say it at one go, once for all."

"It's just not possible. Has anybody ever spoken out everything without reserve? There may be ten things which constitute my very being and of which I may only reveal three to you. And not the rest. Perhaps I may tell four of them to someone else. But there is no one before whom I would spill all the beans, divulge everything. What remains unsaid makes one feel so isolated. It fills one's mind with utter emptiness — on all sides. Everybody reels under certain compulsions." She held my hand while speaking. Her perspiring fingers were shaking. Then she said, "I'll write you a letter. Don't take me amiss."

My train left. She was gradually lost in the darkness of the platform.

There was a letter from her a few days ago. The address on the envelope was in her own hand and it bore her own city's postmark. The envelope contained just one unwritten sheet of paper. It only bore the marks of its folds.

LOST DIRECTIONS

Chander stood leaning against the railing at the street turning. In front and on all sides, people milled past. It was evening and the lights of Connaught Place had begun to twinkle. He was so tired that his feet were giving way. He had not walked much today yet he was utterly exhausted. Weariness descending from his brain and his heart seemed to seep into his entire body. He had wasted the day. He stood there brooding over it. He was in no mood to return home. He could not even whip up an interest in the passing women. The sight added to his weariness.

Hunger... He could not decide whether he was hungry or not. He taxed his mind. He had left home at eight in the morning after having just a cup of coffee — and nothing to go with it. At this thought he felt vaguely hungry, his brain and stomach acting in consonance with each other. Generally he felt hungry only when he thought about it.

He looked up and his gaze remained glued to the sky. There were kites wheeling in the sky and the formation of the clouds made the sky look like a huge pair of stockings. He could see the dome and the minarets of the Jama Masjid under the gray sky. The minarets tapering into sharp points stood silhouetted against the sky, looking somewhat odd.

The shop behind him displayed an advertisement for blouses. Leaves slowly fluttered down from the acacia trees growing near the Regal bus stop. The buses came roaring up, stopped for a moment and sped away after disgorging passengers at one end and devouring them at the other. The traffic lights at the crossing blinked red, and yellow. Hundreds of people passed by but not one

among them gave him a look of recognition. Every passer-by, man or woman, ignored others as if they were nonexistent or strutted along with a false arrogance.

And then Chander recalled his hometown which he had left three years ago. There even if he came across a stranger on the lonely banks of the Ganga he would nod to him politely.

And this Capital city! Here everything belongs to us, to our country, and yet nothing is ours — no, nothing is our country.

He can walk along any of these but they lead nowhere. There are houses, whole colonies, situated on both sides of these roads but he can't enter any of them. The gates outside these houses have small notice boards warning all and sundry to 'beware of dogs', and not to pluck flowers. One must ring the calling bell and wait patiently for a response.

Back home, Nirmala would be waiting for him to return. When he entered the house, he would awkwardly settle down in a chair like an outsider because all the stuff in the room would be kept on the bed and she herself would become busy cooking on the electric heater. He couldn't enter the house like a gust of wind and throw his arms around her because Guptaji would not have returned from the mill and Mrs Gupta, having nothing better to do, would be gossiping with Nirmala or learning a knitting pattern. He would have to behave with proper decorum, exchange a few polite nothings with Mrs Gupta. Then Nirmala would discreetly bring up the question of dinner which Mrs Gupta would take as a signal to leave.

After that he would draw the curtain of the big window and on some pretext close the window, that opened on to Khurana's house. He would then go to the dining table, and on the pretext of asking for a glass of water, call his wife to him. Then he would take her in his arms, and finally be able to say, "I am very tired."

But that point would never be reached. Before completing this long process which he found so exasperating, he would straightaway be forced to say: "Is the food ready? What's the delay?" Gone would be that feeling of oneness with her. His voice would sound so stand-offish. In the nearby bakery shop the radio would

be doling out mournful songs and then the heavy tread of Gulati's tired feet on the stairs.

A scooter would stop in the lane and an unknown man would disappear into a house. The Sikh owner of the motor repair shop would linger on till midnight, the bunch of keys in his hand, because he does not trust his mechanic even after fifteen years of service.

Then he would hear the faint scrape of Bishan Kapur's footsteps. For the past two years he had seen just the nameplate, Bishan Kapur — Journalist. All that he knows about him is that when the electric light filters through the front window and when the cigarette smoke curling against the window bars gets lost in the dense darkness then a man by the name of Bishan Kapur is in the house. And in the morning, when he finds egg shells, bits of bread, cigarette stubs and burnt matchsticks strewn under his window then a man by the name of Bishan Kapur has left the house.

Coming out of his thoughts Chander becomes conscious of the fact that the stench of socks has become insufferable, making it difficult for him to stand by the railing any more. He takes out his pocket diary and goes over his next day's engagements.

First thing in the morning a phone call to the English daily to make an appointment. He has also to drop in at the Radio Station. His previous cheque has to be cashed at the Reserve Bank and a money order needs to be sent home. That would account for the whole day. The Editor not being quite familiar with him, might keep him waiting endlessly before asking him in; there were always endless delays, at the Radio Station too, and at the Reserve Bank he knew no one to expedite matters; this was not Allahabad where the counter clerk Amarnath would encash his cheque at once. As for the post office, there would be a glut of businessmen's peons at the money order counter. They tendered as many as ten money orders each. Being engrossed in calculating the commission on each money order and totalling it up, the clerk would have no time for him.

Chander was feeling so ruffled. The diary still in his hand, his gaze travelled to some high-rise buildings looming in the distance,

crowned with shimmering neon signs. He was not familiar with any of those names. At least in Allahabad he knew that the leading cloth merchant was a very poor man and hawked cloth, carrying bales of it on his shoulders. And now he was so wealthy that his son had gone abroad for higher studies. He himself was a pious man who adorned his forehead with sandal paste while he raked in the profits and prepared to fight the municipal election. But in this big city one didn't get to know anything about anyone.

There was one good thing about Connaught Place. It had such wide, spacious lawns, and an abundance of trees under which the Corporation had placed public benches. Tired people sat on these benches while children played on the lawns. Chander felt the children's faces and their antics were familiar to him but the *golgappa*-eating mummies seemed unfamiliar — their eyes lacked the innocence and pride of motherly affection. Their bodies too lacked the beauty and dignity of motherhood. They exuded a meaningless, stale challenge which one could neither refuse nor accept — a challenge that sounds in the ears of all passers-by who pass on as if they are deaf.

Chander felt like sitting in the lawn for a while. But then he abandoned the idea, for he felt he had no place there; yesterday water had crept up on him silently like a thief through the grass and had soaked his clothes.

Trees stood around in splendid isolation and there was a strange vacuity in the darkness which had gathered under the trees. At least this loneliness gave him a feeling of intimacy. But even this loneliness was disturbed because every ten minutes or so a policeman passed by on his nightly round. Discarded ice cream wrappers and empty packets of parched gram were entangled in the bushes and shrubs. Or a homeless man would depart after emptying his liquor bottle and dumping it among the shrubs.

His glance again went back to his diary. He felt so lonely in the din created by the deluge of on-rushing traffic. He felt that in these three years nothing of any consequence had happened, nothing had become part of his being, nothing had touched him, or left a feeling of joy or pain. This loneliness was like an arid, sandy waste;

it was the silence of an unknown sea coast where the noise of the crashing waves only deepened the silence.

The vaulting sky shaped like a stocking, kites wheeling round the minarets of the Jama Masjid, women chased by flower sellers, orphaned children running around hawking the evening papers — the evening was still full of life.

It suddenly occurred to Chander that an age had gone by in which he had not even encountered himself. He hadn't had time even to ask, 'How are you getting along?' Not to talk of having a tête-à-tête with himself. A faint smile appeared on his face. Taking his diary he jotted down against each successive Friday: 'To meet from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m.' Today was Friday and he resolved that he must make a start today. He looked at his watch — it was seven. But his mind played truant. Why not first have a cup of tea at the Tea House? It seemed he was not keen to meet himself and he wondered why one tried to run away from oneself?

Just at that moment he saw Anand coming in his direction — the last person he would have cared to meet. Anand was a jerk, and he wanted to keep away from that infection. Anand was always on the look-out for a friend, not a close friend but one he could sit and talk for a while. His talk was marked by a strange artificiality of a bookish kind. That artificiality, Chander felt, had also become ingrained in him. Like Anand, he had also imbibed it from books during his college days.

Now he felt that he had wantonly thrown that time to the dogs. He had spent it in the ruins whose descriptions trip off the half-baked tourist guides' tongues and are repeated by rote to successive batches of tourists... 'This is Diwan-e-Khas. Just look at the etchings on the walls. Here there stood a gem-encrusted throne... This is the ladies' bath... and this is the place where the king used to give a royal audience to his subjects. This is the Winter Palace and this the Monsoon Palace and this one the Summer Retreat. Now please step this way. Be careful just watch your steps. This is the place where the gallows were fixed.'

Chander felt as if he had wasted twenty-five years of his life with tourist guides in the midst of ruins whose life-stories he had never

got to know. He was shown only the Diwan-e-Khas and its carvings. After taking him round the guide had left him in the dark and stinking cellar where the gallows were fixed, where bats hung upside down from the ceiling. There was also a discoloured rope dating back to historic times, which entangled one's neck, till one swung to death and then only corpses remained flung into a dark well.

Was there any difference between him and those rotting bodies? And Anand too was no different from them.

Chander wanted to give him the slip because he knew Anand would say to him in his studied way: "Well pal, how good your hair looks. Do you use Brylcream? The girls must be gone on you."

Anand had really stopped in front of Chander: "Hello, you here? What are you doing standing here? Driving those girls raving mad for you?" It made Chander laugh.

"Where are you coming from?" Chander asked, putting his diary in his pocket.

"Today I had a hell of a time. Not of my doing though. Come, let's have a cup of coffee." Anand paused for an instant and then added, "or you want something else?"

Chander knew what he meant and dismissed the idea with a brusque no. But Anand would not give up so easily. "What else is there in life," he said, "does it add up to anything? All right, let it be coffee then," he said resignedly, giving a forced laugh. Then he pressed Chander's hand and said, "please, if you don't mind, do you have some money to spare?" His voice was completely uninhibited and unembarrassed. Evidently, he was short of money.

"Well, partner, I think I can manage it elsewhere," Anand said as an after-thought. "Wait for me. Don't go away." And off he went and did not return.

Chander knew this game.

After some time Chander went into the Tea House. Walking past some tables, he went to the counter where he bought a packet of cigarettes and then settled.

"Hello!" It was a vaguely familiar face. "I'm seeing you after ages." The man sat down in a chair next to Chander. They were silent for a while, at a loss how to start a conversation.

The Tea House was very noisy, full of hollow laughter. There was a clock on the wall which was always fast. There were two passages, marked "Entrance" and "Exit". The third led to the toilet, choked with naphthalene balls. A mirror hung in the gallery. Everyone who went to the toilet looked at himself without fail in the mirror.

At Gaylord preparations were on for the diner-dance. There, rows of chairs had been shifted outside to make room for the dance floor. Volga was mostly patronised by a foreign crowd.

Just then a couple entered. The woman was nicely decked up, a flower tucked in her coiffure. The man's face was marked by a strong superciliousness. They sat down opposite each other in the part of the hall set aside for families. Before they sat down there had seemed to be no acquaintance between them, except that, the man gently placed his hand on her back as a matter of courtesy, helping her to sit down. They sat rather withdrawn from each other as if there was no common topic of interest between them.

The woman looked around, her hands going to her coiffure, while the man stared at the glass of water lying in front of him at the table. They looked around, not from any interest in what was going on. They looked merely because they had eyes. They both must look around only because they must. Had they concentrated their gaze at one point perhaps their eyes would have started smarting.

The bearer served them, and they started eating without a word. After finishing, the man started picking his teeth while the woman took out her handkerchief and dabbed her lips, fixing her lipstick which had got smudged while eating.

The bearer came back with the change. The man left some coins in the tray as a tip, the woman assessing it intently. Then they both pushed back their chairs and moved out disinterestedly, the man allowing her to precede him. Then he caught up with her and walked abreast of her for the first time, giving an indication of some sort of relationship between them.

Chander's heart became heavier, making him feel all the more lonely. He gazed at that vaguely familiar face which had given him a nod of recognition, no small consolation in a sea of unknown faces. Finding that he was being singled out for attention, the man was on the point of speaking but hesitated as if memory were playing tricks on him. Then he said, "Er... you... you are perhaps working in the Ministry of Commerce. I have a feeling..." He abruptly trailed into silence.

Chander's body tingled. Draining the remaining tea in the cup he said in a steady voice, "No, I was never in the Ministry of Commerce."

The man made no effort to make amends. As if sealing that chance contact, he said, "All right, partner, we shall meet again sometime later." And he got up, lighting a cigarette.

Coming out, Chander proceeded to the bus stop. There were four or five people at the bus stop behind the Madras Hotel. A policeman was sitting under the bus shelter, smoking a cigarette.

Chander went up and stood next to him. Everyone wanted to know when the bus would come but no one cared to ask. Chander silently moved away and stood under the darkness of a nearby tree. The dry leaves crackled under his feet when he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. Their sound took him back to many years. There was a deep sense of belonging in that sound. He felt reassured.

Yes, they were similar leaves, dry and yellow. He was walking along that path with Indra many years ago. He had no definite goal before him. He was just squandering his life among ruins. Then Indra had said, "Chander, you are cut out for big things in life." That familiar voice again rang in his ears, "you are cut out for big things in life." And her eyes shone with irrepressible faith in him.

Looking into those love-lorn eyes, Chander had said: "What have I got? Indra, I myself don't know where life will take me. I don't want you to ruin your life because of me. I don't know what will become of me. I may die of starvation. I may even go mad."

Indra's eyes had glowed with love. "Chander, why do you say such things?" She had said. "Whatever you are, wherever you are, I'll be happy with you."

Chander had looked at her intently. Her eyes had become moist. Even her eyebrows seemed to express an innocent faith. He had felt like touching her lock of hair on her brow. But he had hesitated. The earrings in her ears had sparkled like fishes swimming in water. He had said: "Come, let us sit under that tree."

There was a cement bench under that rosewood tree. Walking over the dry, yellow leaves that lay underfoot, they had gone and sat down on that bench. It was the same sound which he had heard a short while ago, the same familiar sound.

Both had sat down on the bench. Chander had held her hand and gently drew lines on her wrist with his fingers. They sat there silent although they had much to say to each other that they could not say. Then Indra had stolen a glance at him and blushed. "Chander, why do you keep thinking in this vein," she had repeated. "Don't you have faith in me?"

Looking deep into her eyes, Chander had said, "I have great faith Indra, but I am afraid I will keep wandering all my life like a nomad. I can't drag you into it. The very thought of it horrifies me. You are made to lead a happy and comfortable life. I have a shroud over my head. Who knows where I may end."

"Whatever you may end up as, good or bad, you will remain dear to me. How I keep waiting for you but you just don't have time for me." After a brief pause she added: "Have you written anything lately?"

"Yes," he had said in a low voice.

"Show me."

With perspiring hands, Chander had handed her his diary. She had hidden it among her books and had told him she would return it the following day. "At least that will give you a reason to call on me."

"No, no, I can't leave my diary. I must take it with me. Give it back, please."

Indra had given him a mischievous smile and the love in her eyes had deepened.

The next day Chander had gone to get his diary back. "I've also written something in it," Indra had said. "Tear it up after reading it."

"No, I won't tear it."

"Then I'll stop speaking to you," Indra had said with childlike simplicity. How lovely the childish words sounded from her lips.

And one day...

One day Indra had come to his house. After spending some time with others she came to Chander's room. It was the first time he had felt so close to her. He put a vermillion bindi on her forehead and watched her in fascination. Then he bent down and put his lips on her forehead. Indra's eyelids had fluttered and a pleasant smell had arisen from every pore of her body, her fingers trembling on Chander's arms while he soaked up the sweat on her forehead with his lips. In the heat of the moment they had together taken a vow — a vow which was wordless and soundless, which did not rise to their lips.

Since then he had always remembered these words — "You are cut out for big things."

Just then the number 2 bus came and sped away after halting for a brief moment. Chander suddenly realised that he was standing at the bus stop. A shock of recognition — one who was once so close to him was not living far from here. Indra too was here, living in Delhi.

He had met her only two months ago. The intimacy of four years ago was still in her eyes.

"I know Chander very well," she had told her husband, "his fads, idiosyncracies and all."

"Then he deserves to be entertained lavishly," her husband had said with great bonhomie.

And smiling as she used to four years ago, Indra had said in a teasing voice, "Chander is allergic to milk. He swallows coffee as he inhales smoke. And if you add a second spoon of sugar to his tea it does havoc to his throat." She had chuckled, and his memories of

the past were revived — Chander really could not take two spoons of sugar in his tea.

The bus was nowhere in sight.

Standing there Chander realized that in this vast city of unknown and half-known people there was a person by the name of Indra who really knew him and still recognized him after the lapse of so many years. He felt exhilarated at the thought. He pined to meet her and to demolish this wall of separation between them.

An auto came charging in his direction. "Gurudwara Road, Karolbagh, Gurudwara Road!" Chander advanced one step. Giving him one sweeping glance the Sikh auto driver proceeded towards him with great alacrity as if he had recognized Chander the moment his eyes had landed on him. "Karolbagh! Gurudwara Road!" Seeing the note of recognition in the driver's eyes, Chander felt pleased. At least there was someone who had at last been able to place him. Chander knew the Sardar by face. He had so many times travelled to Connaught Place in his auto.

Chander got into the auto and three more passengers got in with him. Within minutes the auto had deposited Chander at the Gurudwara Road crossing. Chander took out a four-anna coin and placed it on the driver's palm. Giving him a friendly nod, Chander was about to depart when the Sikh driver stopped him. "Saheb, how much money are you giving me?" Chander turned to look and saw the Sardar coming after him. "Saheb, make it two annas more."

"But I always pay four annas, Sardarji," Chander said, giving him a knowing look. But the Sardar was adamant. There was not a trace of amiableness in his eyes. Chander reminded the man that he had travelled by his auto rickshaw scores of times and had always paid him four annas per trip.

"Sir, it must have been some other auto rickshaw. I always charge six annas..." This time the Sardar had spoken in Punjabi and had stretched out his hand before Chander in a demanding manner.

It was not merely a question of two annas. There was more to it. Chander felt hurt. Without further ado he paid the man another two annas and proceeded towards Indra's house.

She received him warmly. "Must have strayed this side by mistake," she joked, a note of intimacy floating in her eyes. She was waiting for her husband. "It's going on to nine," she said. "Generally he is back home by eight — the factory's closing time. I don't know what has held him up today. You will have tea, of course."

"I can't refuse tea," Chandra said enthusiastically, comfortably stretching out his legs. His tiredness had vanished and he was feeling buoyed up.

The maid-servant brought in tea. Indra poured out tea and he watched her arms and face. She was just she same — known and familiar. "How much sugar," she asked.

With a jolt, all his thoughts were dispersed. He felt his throat constricted and his weariness returning again. He began to sweat. Trying to revive old links he said: "Two spoons," hoping that Indra would remember everything and would ask whether two spoons of sugar wouldn't affect his throat?

But Indra put two spoonfuls of sugar in his cup and held it out to him. He forced the tea down like so much poison, to the accompaniment of inconsequential talk. But there was a tinge of formality in Indra's talk and Chander felt like bolting away from her and striking his head against a wall.

He finished his tea and left, wiping his perspiration. He had not the slightest idea what Indra had been talking of.

Coming on to the road, he sighed and stood there for a while. His throat was parched and there was a bitter taste in his mouth.

At the taxi-stand at the crossing, a few drivers deep in their cups were abusing one another lustily. He saw a dog running away in the distance. Fish was being fried at a wayside stall and its smell leaped up to his nostrils. A few young men were standing at the betelnut shop, bottles of coca-cola held to their mouths. People were speeding away in scooters and the late stragglers, who had to go to the suburbs were anxiously looking into the distance for the arrival of their buses.

Cars, taxis, buses — the traffic had again picked up and the traffic lights at the crossing still blazed red and yellow.

Tired out, Chander was on his way back home. His shoes had started hurting his toes and the foul smell rising from his socks had become unbearable.

At last, he reached home, tired and weary, and sat down on a chair like an intruder. There was nothing new in this. Nirmala greeted him with a smile. "Tired?" she asked, placing her hand on his arm.

"Yes," Chander gave her a loving look. His heart singed within him. Even that rented house made him feel at home and gave him a sense of belonging.

"Have a wash," Nirmala said, arranging the food on the table.

"I don't feel like eating just now," Chander replied.

"Why, what's the matter?" she asked lovingly. "In the morning you ate nothing. Did you eat in the afternoon?"

"Yes, I did," he said, his eyes still fixed on Nirmala. She hesitated and then sat down beside him.

His eyes roved over the room with an abstract gaze and in between he turned an intense look on Nirmala.

In the light falling from behind her, her hair had a silken sheen and her eye lashes looked like soft needles. The shadows falling under her eyes were so intimately familiar. She had pushed her bangle half-way up her arm.

Chander's eyes were probing her body for that old familiar touch of intimacy. Her nails, fingers, the lobes of her ears covered with a feathery down.

He got up, drew the curtain and lay on the bed. He felt he was no longer lonely nor a stranger. The flower vase lying in front was his and so were the clothes lying over there in a heap. He was familiar with their smell.

Their familiarity was ingrained in him. Even in the dense darkness of the night his groping fingers could recognise them. He could walk through any of the doors without bumping into them.

Just then he heard the thud of Gulati's tired feet on the stairs. It made him uncomfortable. Silently, he called Nirmala to himself, made her lie down next to him and, placed his hand on her bosom.

For some time he kept listening to her breathing and feeling her rising and falling bosom. He wished every part of her body and every heart beat to serve as a witness to his deep sense of oneness with her.

In the dark his fingers groped for her nails and touched her eyelids. He put his mouth on her neck, wanting to lose himself. The familiar smell of her washed hair seeped into every fibre of his body and his hand slid over her, searching for recognition. Nirmala's breathing grew heavier.

He felt her fleshy arms and rounded shoulders. Every part of Nirmala's body was drawn to him with a unique attraction. Every pore of hers recognised him, every joint grew tense, the hot blood rose in her, and every breath was constricted. A deep recognition in every part...

Just then light came up in Bishan Kapur's window and they saw cigarette smoke curling around the window bars and disappearing into darkness.

Chander's lonely heart leaping out of the layers of loneliness was drowned in that familiar breathing, that familiar odour, that touch. He did not want anything else. One needs the familiar sigh and in that darkness there was in him a longing to be recognised; he was looking for an old revelation in that breath, that odour, every part of that body.

Stillness reigned.

He felt secure in that silence. He clasped her in his arms, feeling the tide rise. His bodily heat increased and a sea of oneness surged through every pore.

Gradually, Nirmala's quick breathing slowed down. The magnetic pull weakened and the passion ebbed away.

But Chander did not loosen his grip on her arms. The ebbing tide left him alone again, like a shell on an unknown shore.

Extracting her arm from under his body, Nirmala heaved a deep sigh and lay relaxed. Gradually everything drifted into sleep and the pall of night enveloped them. No sound, no voice, anywhere. Nirmala turned on her side as she descended into profound sleep. Chander watched her languidly. He had again started feeling

lonely. He placed his hand on Nirmala's shoulder to make her turn towards him but his fingers seemed to have become inert and lifeless. Defeated, he lay back and did not know when he fell asleep.

After a long time the police station clock struck two, bringing Chander out of his sleep. He felt as if he had been startled out of his drowsiness. The room's stillness frightened him. In the darkness his hand groped for Nirmala, fell on her hair which lay sprawled on the pillow. He felt the silken softness of her hair and bent down to smell it. His hand slid over her body and over the curves of her shoulder. He tried to recognize its intimacy and hear the sound of her soft breathing which was so familiar to him.

Lying on her side, Nirmala moaned in her sleep. Chander's heart missed a beat lest she should awake and give a start like a stranger, breaking that spell of intimacy.

Nirmala's breath caught, as if she were afraid, having a nightmare. Chander felt paralysed. Did she not recognise his touch?

Then he shook her. "Nirmala! Nirmala!" he cried frantically.

As he had feared, Nirmala woke up with a start and rubbed her eyes, trying to get the hang of things.

Turning on the light, he shook Nirmala by both shoulders. "Do you recognise me?" he asked in a terrified voice. "Do you recognize me, Nirmala?"

Nirmala gazed wide-eyed at him and then asked in a low, surprised voice: "What is the matter?"

He kept staring at her. His eyes were searching for something in her face.

THE CINNAMON JUNGLES

Whenever an opportunity came his way, he repaired to the mortuary and sat down there. For that matter, he was not an uncommon sight at the hospital. He was often seen going round its corridors in a leisurely manner or taking his case in a corner. Nobody ever questioned him about his identity. Does anybody ever ask one at the railway station or in a hospital where he was coming from? Or his name?

That day too he was found sitting in the mortuary. There was hardly any space there; the bodies were lying one upon another like bags in a godown. In fact, the place looked more like a godown than a mortuary. It was a matter of great relief to him that the dead bodies did not speak. He found human voices so shattering to his nerves. Their sound would ring in his brain like a conch shell. It would give him the painful sensation of Catherine wheels revolving in his head and their sparks coming through his ears.

It happened when the man incharge of the mortuary came to identify a dead body. It gave rise to sounds triggering off Catherine wheels in his brain.

Most of the dead bodies had met their end through gas poisoning — a slow death, a result of suffocation. And now they were lying peacefully holding their breath. He could recognise many of the dead bodies. The only thing was that he did not remember their names. Perhaps even the dead bodies would not have been able to recall his name. For that matter, he had himself to tax his mind to remember his own name. While engaged in recalling his name, he would feel as if his head was going to burst, throwing up jets of blood and putting the Catherine wheels in

motion. This horrendous spectacle of fire and blood would shatter him completely and he would find peace in the mordant silence of the mortuary. At last when the wheels of fire were extinguished, something no less gruesome would take their place. A tornado of searing, hot wind would blow through his lungs and his eyelids would flutter like sparklers.

Sometimes the dead would talk with each other, sharing their woes and sorrows. Good that they were now sleeping in peace. Oh, how the moneylender used to pester that fellow day in and day out and he would try to hide from him. Then there was another man who had five daughters and a lame son. Luckily for him, three daughters had popped off and were now lying in the Sultania hospital morgue. Nothing was known about the other two.

"Does this fellow know?" one dead man asked the other, alluding to the father of five daughters.

"Of course, he does. That is why he's having such a carefree time."

"Has no woman showed up?"

"They are all lying in Sultania hospital."

"Yes, it's a question of one's self-respect. Won't a woman die of shame in a male morgue?"

When the dead men were talking among themselves, his own wife had suddenly come to his mind and her face started dancing before his eyes. But he could not recall her name. How to address her? By what name should he call her? That night when the gas tragedy happened she was cooking meat. It was a winter night and the *chulha* (brazier) was emitting welcome heat both ways — from the burning charcoals and the mutton cooking in the pot. His wife had kept looking at him and smiling. It was indeed a very happy day for them. They could partake of meat only on rare occasions. This time his wife had saved money over many days to buy meat from the bazaar.

"If you have to go without meat for ten days you make mince meat of me," his wife had said, laughing, pleased with her innocent taunt. She had again smiled coyly. At the time of parting on her wedding day her friend had given her a phial of Kanauj scent. One

had to dab only a rice grain size quantity on a cotton swab and it would fill the whole place with musk-like smell. His wife always felt nostalgic about the *terai* forest at the foot of the hills where the deer roamed in large hordes and where the cinnamon trees gave out an enchanting smell on getting wet during the rains. The smell would permeate the whole forest. His wife missed this smell in Bhopal and pined for it.

Like a cinnamon tree her body would also get pliant and soft and exude a pleasant odour.

The morgue gave out a sharp acidic smell, similar to the smell which filled the air that night when the gas tanks exploded. But by now he had become inured against this offensive smell. Getting mixed with the pleasant smell of the cooking meat, that night it had smitten his eyes like burning sulphur. The picture of his wife had got obliterated in the smoke rising from the sulphur.

It was four long years ago. Since then he had said good-bye to the Hamidia hospital morgue where he used to stay away from prying eyes to seek peace of mind. The morgue was oppressively hot. The contractors used to make short supply of ice slabs and the ones that were delivered late would soon melt and their pungent-smelling turgid water would crawl through the drains like sick serpents. Had the place not become so uncongenial he would have been the last person to leave. To make matters worse, the chowkidar had waylaid him in the end and he had willy-nilly to make his exit.

When the nerves in his brain did not sprout like fountains he could hum some snatches of songs. But even then he could not hit upon his name. Debouching from the morgue he had proceeded towards Jahangirbad.

Aimlessly wandering along the railway station, he had taken Green Park in his stride and then making a detour of Shajahanabad he had reached Loha Bazaar from where the cool breeze had taken him to Shiamla Hill.

He had failed to get peace of mind anywhere. By now that cursed chowkidar had become extra-vigilant. He just wouldn't allow him to come near the morgue and even if he managed to get in, he would immediately throw him out, raining down abuses at him into

the bargain. The only redeeming feature was that since the gas tragedy the government had started public kitchens where he could get free meals. The government also distributed free medicines but he was long since past the stage of medicines.

His memory had become erratic. He only remembered things in small bits punctuated by long blanks, most of the things being lost in the limbo of memory.

Once he had also joined a crowd. It was a huge crowd teeming with people, remonstrating loudly and asking for compensation. They were waving flags as they marched in a procession. Like others, he was also given some money. But of what happened subsequently he remembered nothing. Sometimes they had taken photographs of the crowd including his own. They had also made a film. His photograph had also been published in a newspaper without bearing his name. He could vaguely recall all this in a muddled manner. Had his name appeared under the photograph he would have at least known what name he passed under.

He had come in for a lot of trouble for want of a name. He had been unceremoniously expelled many a time for not knowing his name. The chowkidar had been the worst offender in this regard. By now most of the old inmates of the morgue were gone and their number had seriously depleted. On account of this it had become all the more difficult for him to identify himself. Oh, what a hell of a trouble it was! How he wished that someone among the dead had recognised him, called him by his name!

Once when he was passing through the gate of the Hamidia hospital, someone gave him a startled look. "Arrr, is it you?" the man exclaimed and walked away.

For an instant he felt that at last here was a man who must be knowing his name. He had run after the man frantically shouting: "Stop, stop! Tell me my name." But the man had got scared and in spite of a wild chase he could not locate him for he had got lost in the crowd at the bazaar crossing. Again he was left unknown and nameless.

After this frantic chase jets of blood had again erupted in his brain, coupled with the revolving Catherine wheels. He had started

panting and had sat down at the edge of a tank. It was because of these tanks that the people of southern Bhopal had escaped total annihilation.

Some people were sitting at the edge of the tank chatting among themselves. "It's a big American company," one of them said. "They don't rate us better than crawling insects. About forty years ago they used to dump their surplus wheat into the sea. Even when they knew that our country was starving. There was a sinister motive behind their installing a factory here. They wanted to experiment with their gases." He had heard all this in his lucid moments before lapsing into a state of forgetfulness. To his great regret the man who could tell him his name was lost in the crowd and perhaps now there was nobody left who could enlighten him on this point.

He was familiar with the name Bhopal and even knew the city. But Bhopal did not know him, much less his name.

To get over this rigmarole he had decided to go to his in-law's house — in the *terai* region where the cinnamon trees grew and where the musk deer roamed. But the snag was that he couldn't even recall his wife's name, nor the locality where her house was situated. And then, who would have recognised him? Even if they had recognised him could he tell them his name? Or his wife's.

He was in a great quandary, tossing between lucidity and forgetfulness.

Many quacks and half-baked doctors were making the best of the times. They had even managed to get jobs in the Hamidia, Sultania, Jai Prakash and Nehru hospitals and were thriving on unfortunate victims of his type who thronged their clinics and hospitals. But none of them knew his name.

At a protest meeting held in Bharat Bhawan he was also handed a banner. The meeting was held to highlight the Bhopal gas tragedy. But even the Bharat Bhawan people had failed to recognise him. He had heard that a poet who had been pleading the cause of these unfortunate victims in his poetic effusions at Bharat Bhawan had been awarded a purse of one lakh rupees. But he could not recall his poet friend's name nor the approximate location of his residence.

Anyway, he was in no need of money. Sometimes the government doled out money to him and on other occasions the American people sent money in the form of donations. But that had had no effect in curbing the jets of blood in his head and those revolving wheels which had made life a hell for him.

He didn't even get the benefit of free medicines. The doctors in collusion with each other had declared him insane, without elaborating on the cause of his insanity.

One day he had run into a famous doctor who was living under a peepul tree behind the morgue. He used to treat his patients with the injectible ampoules thrown away by the hospital through one of its windows. When the hospital doctor declared this man insane and pushed him out of the queue of the gas victims this famous doctor happened to be watching all this through a window. Holding the man by his arm he sat him down on a garbage bin. Addressing him the doctor said, "Trouble comes galloping like a horse; retreat slowly, crawling like an ant. Galloping like a horse... Do you understand?"

The famous doctor took the man to the peepul tree and waving a piece of paper and a pen in the air, asked him, "Name?... Age?... Locality?" He reeled out the questions in one breath.

Finding the man hesitating, the doctor muttered, "Never mind, never mind!" But before the man knew what was happening, the doctor gave him a stunning slap on his cheek and like a monkey in the habit of biting, he started muttering, "Kurum, kurum... jhaiam, jhaiam! You, *Sala*, why don't you play it well?" They kept playing on the drum for a long time till the doctor lay down exhausted. "Son, work hard without expectation of reward," he said, still lying prone on the ground. "*Sala*, if you want to live in this country learn to live here like an alien. Eat garbage and die a dog's death." The doctor started laughing hysterically and said between laughter, "Cry! Louder! Louder still!"

He could not bring himself to crying but still his eyes filled with tears. The doctor put the nozzle of an ampoule on his eyelid and his tears trickled into it.

"I've collected some drops of your tears in this ampoule and will prescribe a medicine after testing them," the doctor said, adding: "Everything is under investigation in the big court... The court will give medicine for damaged lungs, The upper court, I mean the High Court at Jabalpur will also give medicines for damaged eyes. What is the cost of your trouble per kilo, I mean how many rupees per kilo? Why don't you speak, *Sala*?" The famous doctor lifted his hand to strike, but before it could descend on the man, he stopped short of its reach and started running. He kept running till he reached the bazaar.

In the bazaar a newspaper vendor was shouting at the top of his voice: "The Supreme Court's judgement on the gas tragedy! Seven hundred crore compensation!"

A man flung his plastic shopping bag in the air and cried, "*Sala*, now mutton will cost forty rupees per kilo!"

Suddenly, the inviting smell of cooking mutton floated to the man's nostrils, followed by the cinnamon smell wafting from his wife's body. His Bhopal had also started smelling like the cinnamon jungles. They were all so fascinating and alive — the jungles, his wife and he himself!

He again broke into a run and while running looked back over his shoulder. The doctor was engaged in waving the ampoules in the air and examining the tear drops therein. It seemed his own test report was not yet ready.

He ran in the direction of Sophia College from where he made it to Jahanabad. It had taken him four years to complete the race. When he came within reach of Jahanabad slums he could not find the way to his own hut. So he had forgotten the way even to his own dwelling, he thought. He was going helter-skelter in search of his dwelling when a man collared him and said, "Where were you all this while?"

He tightly gripped the man by his arm so that he may not give him the slip as had happened before. Maybe the man could tell him his name.

"Where were you all this time?" the stranger repeated the question.

"Do you know my name?"

"Name? Mushtaq, why are you joking with me?"

Mushtaq! Mushtaq! Mushtaq! The sound went booming in all directions. Now he could also hear the railway engine's whistle, the sound of running tongas and rickshaws. He could hear these sounds very distinctly, as if everything had fallen in its proper place with the announcement of his name. Now he could hear a sewing machine working in Mushtaq tailor's shop and clothes being stitched. One could also hear his wife squabbling with him with gay abandon. "Don't talk to me about bringing another woman, even if you are saying it in jest. I can't bear it."

"Yar, now that you have done me a good turn, show me the way to my house also," Mushtaq asked that stranger.

"Your house? Mushtaq, you don't have a house now."

"What? But my wife...? What about my wife...?" When he could not recall his wife's name in spite of taxing his mind, he gave the stranger a helpless look. "Yar. What's my wife's name?" he asked hesitatingly.

"So you've forgotten even your wife's name? It's good in a way, I must say."

"What do you mean by that? I'll come to it later. But first tell me her name."

"Shabnam."

"Yes, yes, Shabnam... Shabbo, Shabbo!" The word kept resounding a long time in all directions. Shabbo; Mushtaq! Shabbo; Mushtaq!

Feeling exhilarated at the return of his memory, he could now even recognise the stranger. "Dullan!" he said warmly hugging the man. "Yar, you have given my whole world back to me. Come, Dullan, we shall have tea together. Shabbo will prepare it for us."

"Shabbo is not there," Dullan said in a doleful voice.

"Why, where's she gone? Has she gone back to her parents?"

"Well, you must know how things are, Mushtaq. Do you see the projecting eaves over which they have fixed the TV's antenna. No, not that pole for the pigeons; the other one behind which you can see that small attic. She had been living in it for the last three years.

She spent the first year waiting for you but it was getting too much for her and she moved into the small room adjoining it. What else could she do? You were not there and she had no other means of making a living."

Mushtaq stood stunned in the midst of creeping stillness. Then the plantations of cinnamon caught fire and began to burn like nylon saris. Blood rushed to his brain, setting the Catherine wheel in motion. His lungs were working like bellows.

Then he looked around, gave a faint smile and ran screaming. He would stop at random and cry: "Full plate four thousand. Half plate fifty thousand. Quarter plate four lakh. How much does it come to? And how much meat? Just calculate and let me know."

He would resume running. Where was he going, he himself did not know. He would suddenly stop and ask looking into vacancy, "Have you calculated? Tell me, how much? Add, subtract, multiply, divide. Tell me, how much? How many crores? How many hundred crores? A mountain of money. Not the Shiamla Hill but the mountain of American money. How much meat does it make? Add, subtract and let me know."

By the time he reached the gate of Hamidia Hospital he had almost started haranguing.

"Everybody's case is before the court," he said. Mythil Iso Cynite gas. MIC floating in the air. The court will give the right medicine for damaged lungs. The court will give the medicine for blinded eyes. You know trouble comes galloping like a horse. The judgement in Bhopal gas case has been delivered. A mountain of American money. The cinnamon plantation is burning. Do you know that? Mutton is forty rupees per kilo. Friends, just sample it for taste. Have real fun. Enjoy yourself. Mountains piled high with hundreds of crores of rupees. Full plate four thousand rupees — the one which has broken. Half plate fifty thousand rupees — the one which has cracked. Four lakhs for the quarter plate — the one which has been contaminated by gas. Add, subtract, multiply, divide and let me know the figure. Have you seen the statue which says: 'No Hiroshima for us.' And no Bhopal. We just want to live — to perpetuate the memory of those who perished on the night

of 2nd and 3rd December 1984 in the gas tragedy or were killed. Full plate... ha, ha, ha! It is the miracle of the American company which wanted to test the potency of its gas on us. The jungles are being cut and men are changing into dead bodies like felled trees.

Mutton, mutton, everywhere. Friends, they have opened a mutton market, where they sell dead flesh and a market where they sell living flesh. A woman's body for twenty rupees for the entire night. There is a statue standing erect and telling people the gruesome story of its life. There's another statue lying prostrate in bed. Have you calculated? What does it add up to? It's your boast that you are good at sums. A woman's body at twenty rupees for the night, mutton forty rupees per kilo and human flesh at eleven rupees per kilo. Tell me, what figure have you arrived at?

Just then a resounding slap fell on Mushtaq's cheek and the onlookers burst out laughing. It was the renowned doctor of the peepul tree who was dragging Mushtaq away from the crowd. A lot of glass ampoules were lying under the tree. Mushtaq sat down under the tree, laughing. "What nonsense were you talking there," the doctor asked him.

Mushtaq gave the doctor a tense look and muttered: "A mountain of money. A woman's body for twenty rupees for the night. Mutton at forty rupees per kilo. Human flesh at eleven rupees per kilo."

"Sala, why don't you tell me, how much is your suffering worth per kilo?" the doctor cried. He waved the glass ampoule in the air and said, "I'll decide about your line of treatment after I get your test report. Kuruk, kurum! Jhayium!"

Both of them started beating the drum with great gusto and kept at it for a long time.

MARIAM

It is the same scene — almost always. I have seen people looking sad, most of them sobbing and crying when leaving India for Pakistan, whether from the Attari railway station or Delhi's Indira Gandhi airport. Strange thoughts come crowding in my mind and my eyes are filled with tears. My heart cries, "Shaheen, Shaheen!" but my voice does not reach Lahore.

Shaheen had come to India — to give me something. She looked at me but I avoided her gaze. I did not want to look at the grave of a relationship where my and her moments of life lay entombed.

I have seen Shaheen's life from close quarters, in all its forms and phases. Now there is nothing more left to see. I know intimately all the curves and contours of her body and mind. The incision mark stretching from her abdomen to her back shows how deeply I have loved her.

But now it is futile to recall all these things. What's the use? Shaheen's and my lives are now like a path lined by extinguished clay lamps. Good if the lamps are not lighted again, though the extinguished lamps make the surrounding darkness more intense.

Shaheen had come only for a few days. I had gone upstairs leaving her with Apa.

It was the time of night.

My mind was calm and composed. I took out a bottle of whisky and made a peg. I took a sip and went into the bathroom. The handkerchiefs had been soaking in the bucket since afternoon. I washed them and spread them out on the hooks to dry. Then I started drinking. The sea lay stretched before me. It was so calm. I

took another sip and putting out the lamps switched on the bedlight and got the air-conditioner going. I pulled on the bedsheet over my body and picked up a book to read and kept reading late into the night.

It was Shaheen herself who woke me up in the morning although now she had lost the right to enter my room. She had lost this right five years ago when she had taken a divorce from me and gone away to Lahore after marrying another man. Perhaps she wanted to see her old room and her former husband. Any woman, whoever she may be, comes back at least once to see her previous house. It does her heart good to see its decayed ruins. Perhaps Shaheen had come with such thoughts in her mind and she had come up escaping Apa's attention. When I opened my eyes on her softly calling me, the light was on. The wine glass like the imperious king of chess, threatening to checkmate a move was standing empty at the head of the bed.

A tremor ran through my body on seeing Shaheen.

What if the dead body turned on its side in the grave?

I feared lest the flowers offered at the grave the previous day should suddenly take root.

"Do you have a disprin?" Shaheen asked me.

Suddenly I was catapulted to a time five years ago when she used to ask me for disprin. Always, first thing in the morning. It was now all over and done with and yet she had asked for a disprin in the same manner.

"There must be one in your pouch," she said. Everything was still so fresh in her mind.

I picked up my pouch, unzipped it and overturned its contents. Hundreds of times she had put my shaving kit in this pouch. And medicines, among other odds and ends. As I spilled the contents of the pouch her uncanny eyes suddenly spotted a hairpin among these things which was just not there.

"Whose pin is this?" she asked.

"Which pin? What kind of pin?"

Perhaps the pin was still stuck somewhere in the deep recesses of her subconscious mind. In the same way as the pin was present

in my subconscious mind. They were the beginning days of our lives. One of her hairpins had remained entangled in the bedsheets and I had put it between the pages of my book like a book mark. I must have read hundreds of books when Shaheen was living with me. The book kept changing but not the book-mark. It was really surprising how today, after such a long time she had spotted that pin among a mass of knick-knacks. That pin, which in a way, had no existence of its own and yet very much existed.

Spreading the things before me I said: "Where? What kind of pin?"

I thought she had withdrawn into herself. In fact, it seemed she had something else on her mind. For that matter what remains unsaid is the essence of the thing. It gets across without being said. Perhaps Shaheen wanted to remind me that there used to be a pin.

The mind too, like the spider can live and thrive in its own web. Maybe it was the hard core of truth coming from within my mind which I wanted to hear from Shaheen's lips. Shaheen may be anybody but no Shaheen can help looking askance at another Shaheen's pin.

Gone, gone are those relationships. Suddenly I felt that I couldn't even suffer to look at Shaheen. Even when she looked at me in her characteristic way it failed to create any ripples in my mind. Her glances used to create a deep impression on my mind — deep and disturbing. But now her eyes had become like a dead lake whose water has not just dried up but has become extinct. But even now there were some fishes swimming in those eyes. Amen!

Dead and broken ties, a long silence being a witness to them. And a stillness which breathed fitfully. How alert we have to remain. Even a seemingly innocuous hint can hark back to the most intricate and dense moments of our lives. One can't become impervious to such conditions by acting like a stranger. There are not one but thousands of such moments which can serve as a throw back to our past — moments, which can make a dent in that pervasive silence. I, therefore, intentionally gave a different turn to our talk.

"Well, Shaheen, may I ask you one thing?"

"Yes?"

"Why do people cry when leaving for Pakistan?"

"They cry in the same way when coming to India."

"Maybe it is because they feel sad at leaving these countries."

"No, it's not that. It's because they are parting from each other," Shaheen said.

I don't know how and why even our most pedestrian and mundane talk sometimes ends on a highly individualistic note. This expression, 'parting from each other' lay congealed between us for sometime. Unwittingly, it had come to assume a personal connotation.

At last Shaheen took the situation in hand by thawing the frozen moments.

"I was coming to India after such a long time," she said. "I was feeling so tense during the flight. Suddenly a pain flared up in my teeth." Shaheen seemed to have been caught in the web of her own talk like a fish. She seemed to be oblivious of the fact that toothache and the agony of life bear a close relationship with each other. With change in age, country or companion the cause of toothache or the basic pattern of life do not change.

When the eighteen-year-old Shaheen had come here for the first time via Aligarh and Delhi she had suddenly got a severe toothache just on getting down from the plane and she had to be taken to the dentist straight from the airport. Subsequently during our married life, she had often alluded to this toothache as bearing testimony to the fact as to how much I cared for her.

"Shaheen, a pain that occurs once is no pain at all, a pain must come again and again," I wanted to tell her but desisted from saying so.

The phone rang. It was so early in the morning. It was always Shaheen who used to reach out to the phone leaning over me. The bell kept ringing for sometime. For a while the moments between us came to life and hung between us. At last I picked up the phone. It was Apa speaking on the intercom.

"Is Shaheen with you?"

"No, Apa," I lied.

"But she is not in her room."

"Must be in the bathroom."

"Maybe."

"Or she may have gone into the compound for a stroll. Perhaps a new fad of her's. Apa, get the tea ready. She should be with us any moment." I put down the phone.

A lie can conveniently mask the truth to great advantage. Shaheen also took full advantage of it. She poured the overnight water from a flask into a glass lying at the head of the bed and dissolved a tablet of disprin in it.

"Send for your tea here," she said. "I'll also join you."

"Now we don't have an intercom in the kitchen. Nor in the servant's outhouse. Now they bring tea in their own good time," I told Shaheen.

"Oh!" she said as if my remark had given her a jolt. The two fishes again twisted and turned in the dead water. The intercom was Shaheen's idea. She was obsessed by it. But now...

The chain of time had snapped. Freeing itself from between us it had disappeared somewhere the very day Shaheen had gone away to Pakistan after marrying a second time. Now memories stood between us like inconclusive evidence in a court of law. But the time at which the evidence was to be recorded was not there.

Right in the morning a graveyard had intervened between us. There is no reckoning of time between the dead. In fact, time does not exist for the dead.

Shaheen was going down when I said, "be careful, Apa shouldn't see you coming down the stairs."

The fishes took another turn in the dead water. Shaheen climbed down the stairs on stealthy steps as if she was walking on borrowed feet. The room which used to remain filled with Shaheen's body odour was this morning without even a faint trace of it. In the sun filtering through the window overlooking the stairs, Shaheen's shadow had also come down with her body.

I got up and went into the bathroom.

The intercom rang again. It was Apa. "Please come," her voice came over the phone. "Breakfast has been laid."

"Have you found Shaheen?"

"She can't be lost. She likes to see *amaltas* trees in bloom. She must be in the compound admiring the trees."

The trees followed us to the breakfast table.

"At that time these trees were very small, yet too young to yield flowers," the talk went on.

"Just look at the vagaries of nature," Apa said. "Only *amaltas* flowers grow on *amaltas* trees. Mango tree produce only mangoes, not guavas."

Shaheen's hand moved towards my plate and remained arrested over it. "Want anything?"

"No, I noticed something darkish in my omelette."

It was a burnt onion shred.

The returned moment had brought something in tow. We were sitting facing each other like high piles of old newspapers. Nobody ever repeats stale news. Leaving the old newspapers behind the news marches on.

"Then how did you feel like? I mean after getting down at the airport?" I asked Shaheen as if inadvertently. Apa thought my question rather odd. What kind of links was I trying to forge with the word 'then'? Now there was no story between us which could weld us together. Nor was there any loose end to take care of. And thousand mercies — may Apa be blessed for it that she did not try to stretch the matter under the surface. With a clever move Shaheen scotched the subject. How clever of her indeed!

"Apa it's also true of Pakistan," she said. "The same thing happens there — a mango on a mango tree and a guava on a guava tree. As I got down at the airport, India looked so alien to me. And then the roads, the lanes, the bazaars, the people — everything looked unfamiliar. The seasons, the trees, the dust — everything."

Apa did not pay much heed to what Shaheen was saying. I also did not show any desire to reconnoitre the terrain any further.

We let the matter drop there. Shaheen had to go for shopping with Apa and she went away to bathe and change. I returned to my room.

The kind of houses they build here. Either there is one bathroom on top of the other or both of them stand cheek by jowl, their watery arms thrown around each other. Shaheen was taking her bath. I could hear the constant patter of falling water from the shower.

How I wanted to ask her if the cord still left its mark as it dug into the flesh at her waist as before! Like fissures on deep sand. But now what was the point in asking her? It made no sense. It was a thing to be observed and felt. I thought Shaheen would come out in salwar-kameez. But it happened as I wanted it. She came out of her room in saree and blouse, her petticoat tightly tied at the waist which was apparent from the folds of her sari. The incision mark of her operation running from her abdomen to her back still stood out prominently. Life changes but it leaves its marks behind. The places associated with those memories undergo changes but the memories don't change.

They were gone only a short time when the car suddenly returned. Apa and Shaheen got down from the car wearing worried looks. The shops and the departmental stores were frantically pulling down their shutters. They learnt that Jageshwari and Mohammed Ali Road were in the grip of rioting.

I lowered my head with shame. I didn't know how I was going to explain it to Shaheen. Perhaps I would have to concede her the point that she had done well by migrating to Pakistan.

Shaheen seemed to have understood my predicament. "It's nothing new for us," she said trying to put me in good spirits. "In Pakistan Muslims go after other Muslim's blood. In Pakistan one Muslim cuts another Muslim's throat."

The table had been laid for lunch.

Shaheen had changed into *lungi* and *kurta* before coming to the dining table. It was a Sindhi *lungi* and a Lucknowi *kurta*. They continued with their small talk.

"I hear they have hauled up your younger brother-in-law for drug trafficking or some such thing," Apa suddenly said. "I think it was Javed or somebody who had come from Lahore. He told us about it. Wasn't it Javed?" Apa had thrown the question in my direction but it was Shaheen who was expected to give the reply.

"Yes, my brother-in-law was arrested in this connection," Shaheen replied in an urbane manner. "Now he is completing his term in jail. Had he been in India he would have been behind bars in the same manner. Yesterday we visited Abu's grave... Uncle lies buried in Pakistan. Every year I read *fateha* at his grave. Both the graves exude the same smell. The smell of the earth is the same everywhere; it hardly changes with change of place. Except the smell of the earth no other smell was there nor here. By now they must have become one with the earth." Shaheen had become over-sentimental.

"Apa, you must remember that Maujan (maternal uncle) had also migrated to Karachi. Even after Pakistan came into being he kept on demanding a Pakistan of his own and one day paid for it with his life. If he were living in India the Meerut or Bhagalpur riots could have as well taken a toll of him. It amounts to the same thing. No Muslim kills a Hindu, nor does a Muslim kill a Muslim. It's only hate that kills them. Today the Mujahreens (migrate) are demanding a Pakistan — within a Pakistan the demand being made at Karachi. Yes, Pakistan was formed, but was it, really?"

"Shaheen, which Pakistan had you set up against me?" I wanted to ask her that night. But the night was far advanced and Shaheen had got up to go to her room to sleep.

The same thing happened in the morning. I woke up at the sound of her footsteps although she had no business to come to my room without any inhibition. She had forfeited this right five years ago when she had sought a divorce from me, married a second time and had gone away to Lahore.

Yes, she had no right to enter my room and wake me up. Last night also I had switched off my light, turned on the bedlight and put on the air conditioner. Then I had pulled the bedsheet over my body and picked up a book to read.

Avoiding Apa's attention, Shaheen had today again come to my room and like yesterday she had called me in a soft voice, waking me up from my sleep. The light was on and my eyes had fallen on the empty wine glass standing there in a challenging stance like the knight of chess.

My gaze roved over Shaheen. She was looking agitated.

"Javed, just ten minutes back Shahid had phoned me," she said.

"Shahid? It's your husband's name, isn't it?"

"No, my son. Let your questions wait. The little Shahid had phoned me up, 'Hello, Mummy!' Out of habit I had replied, 'Good morning, son. So you are up. You must brush your teeth the first thing.' 'O.K. Mummy, I'll brush my teeth just now. But first tell me when are you coming back?' Javed, then I suddenly realised that I was not in Pakistan but in India."

But what was the point in co-mingling India and Pakistan, mentioning them in the same breath? My anger mounted. I asked her in a harsh voice, "Shaheen, this Shahid, — is he the same boy whom you had carrying for two months in your womb at the time of the divorce?"

"No," Shaheen's voice was more incisive than harsh. "No, that one, I mean yours — I had got rid of him. My husband would have none of it. He abhorred the very thought of it. This Shahid is the son of a Sindhi Hindu who was killed in the riots in Karachi. He was only two days old at that time. I had picked him up from among the unclaimed children in the hospital."

I sat there looking at Shaheen with a dead pan expression. From the hospital's exchange? A Sindhi Hindu boy? Two days old? The walls of the room swam before my eyes. I did not want to believe in what Shaheen had said. It was so unsavoury.

"So your husband, Col. Zaidi, had refused to accept my child? And this Kafir's brat — I mean he didn't mind adopting this orphan?"

"No, he didn't accept this child either. It was this child that led to our divorce. On the spot. There and then, on the spur of the moment."

"You... Shaheen, you're hiding something from me."

"Javed, a woman has a lot of things to hide. But a mother has nothing to hide. When the two-day-old Shahid would not stop crying I put his lips to my dry breast. My breasts swelled up but no milk came from them. The child started crying vehemently. I took out some milk from the fridge, made a cotton swab dipped in milk and put it to his lips. And he slowly sucked some milk. He had fallen asleep, placing his tiny hand on my breast. And then... and then, Javed, fountains of milk had started oozing from different parts of my body that night. I felt as if my whole blood had turned into milk. My breasts were heavy with milk."

"Is Shaheen with you?" Apa's voice came over the intercom.

"Yes, Apa, we are just coming down."

"All right." Apa's suspicions, which had yet to take root yesterday, had now been confirmed.

THE PEOPLE OF MY COUNTRY

A good many people were gathered there, each of them with a tag round his neck, bearing his name and the nature of his ailment.

Deendayal: Age 40. Disease: Demands more salary, refuses to salute.

Sadanand: Age 25. Disease: Pilfers office stationery.

Ibrahim: Age 30. Disease: Is very outspoken.

S. Subramaniam: Age 38. Disease: Outshines his officer.

Subroto Ghosh: Age 26. Disease: Does not connive at a wrong.

Subodh Prakash: Age 25. Disease: Complains against his boss in writing.

The tags round their necks, they stood mute, one behind the other as in a queue. A Section Officer, playing the role of a commander, his arm loaded with about a dozen files, was questioning the men one by one. He would take out tablets from his pocket and hand them to the men. Those who had been given the tablets were standing silent while the others were clamouring for it.

The overall atmosphere was like a hospital's. Many officers wearing white overalls like doctors were walking up and down with great alacrity, looking very busy. They were overshadowed by some persons, apparently looking like aliens, who seemed to be specialists in their respective lines. They were going round with the doctors giving them instructions before moving on. The corridors were cluttered up with files piled high up to the ceiling and obstructing free movement. In place of nurses there were males

who were smoking *biris*. They would hide their *biris* at the sight of the doctors and then resume smoking as their backs were turned.

It was a busy place, humming with activity. I entered the room of the Registration Office who was sitting still like a statue. On seeing me entering, the peon who was standing by, gently opened his eyelids so that he could behold me standing before him. Then the peon gently pulled his right cheek so that his lips elongated and a smile appeared on his face.

I asked him in a grave voice: "Which is this department and what are its functions?"

The Registration Officer looked at his peon upon which the peon pressed a button fixed under the officer's chin and a voice spoke: "So that democracy can take firm roots in India we need a new generation imbued with a sense of dedication and capable of understanding what the government expects of it. It should not just see rosy dreams nor use its intelligence critically, asking the why and wherefore of things. Neither should it ask for the wherewithals of good living, make no demands for two square meals a day or a roof over its head. It should not allow its imagination to run amok over rising prices. It should not take part in public demonstrations or join processions. All these impede progress. This department has been established to reorient and reform employees so that they put their heart and soul in their work."

Having uttered these words the Registration Officer's voice tapered off into silence. The peon had switched off the button.

I again asked: "But there are some government and private agencies which are rendering the same kind of services for the people at large. They are also taking steps to promote economic equality and bring into being a new social order based on equity and justice. Then why does your department want to enter this domain which only means unnecessary duplication of work?"

This time the peon pressed the button fixed above the officer's ear and he again broke into speech: "The fact of the matter is that nothing much devolves on the government and non-government agencies. They only present an empty facade like an elephant's tusk to hoodwink the people. The reality is somewhere else behind this

glitter. All these so-called social workers and politicians who claim to be servants of the people are in reality self-seekers..." The officer wanted to continue but the peon promptly pressed the button which controlled the officer's brain and he fell silent. Then the peon pressed his lips joining them together. Thus silenced, all that the officer could do was gape at me.

Emerging from the officer's room, I walked along the corridor and entered another room where yet other officers were gathered round an operation table, some foreign specialists among them. There was a huge pile of files in a corner from which a clerk was jotting down something. Two surgeons wearing gloves were standing by the side of the operation table, two big kukris (Nepalese country knife) in hand.

The clerk, sitting in a corner, called out the first name: "Deendayal! Age, 40 years; disease, demands more salary, refuses to salute."

Deendayal walked in, a worried look on his face which had turned pale. As he entered, a doctor-like officer caught hold of him. His eyes roved over the officers of whom he had recognised a few. Then the surgeons holding kukris advanced towards him. One of them felt his body. The other remarked, "I think we should take out his reflection first."

Surgeon number two picked up some medicine from the side table and made Deendayal sniff it. Then inserting his hand into his mouth he pulled out something resembling a soul and laid it on a plate on the table.

The first surgeon gestured to the other surgeon. Down came a kukri over Deendayal's skull, making a gaping hole in it from which a diary fell out on the pillow. A doctor-like officer peered into Deendayal's skull. It was empty. Another doctor picked up the diary and read through it, turning its pages. Deendayal had jotted down a lot of things in the diary.

For instance, he had systematically recorded the details of the loans he had taken from others. A doctor added up the amount. It came to five thousand rupees. Deendayal had also recorded the increments in his salary over the years. It was found that during his

last twenty-four years' service his salary had increased only by one hundred and ten rupees. He had started on eighty-five rupees and was now getting one hundred and ninety-five rupees.

Besides this, he had also written down the amounts he had been sending every month to his son for his education, not to mention the contribution made towards flood relief and national defence. There were also entries recording the births and deaths of the members of his family and kith and kin in various hospitals.

Getting down to work again, the surgeons gouged out Deendayal's eyes with the kukri. As they detached the corners from the eyes, long strips came out with them, resembling camera reels. The reels were unending and the surgeons at last snipped them off.

They were strange reels indeed — an assortment of varied impressions, some bizarre and grotesque, others lovely and beautiful. For instance, there were neat and clean homes, well-decorated shops, displaying beautiful saris in shop windows, trousers, dress suits, shirts, healthy chubby children, colourful toys, beautiful hotel fronts and pictures of pilgrim centres such as Haridwar and Banaras.

There was such a plethora of pictures that they started jarring on the surgeons. They rolled them up and put them aside. Then at a gesture from his companion, Surgeon Number One cut open Deendayal's stomach with his kukri. No sooner had he exposed the entrails than a dense smoke rose from his stomach filling the room with the acrid smell of *biris*. When the smoke cleared, they saw a ration card and some grocery bills. There were also some *biri* stubs and sodden remains of tea leaves, all of which the surgeons deposited on a tray while a clerk standing by made a careful inventory of all the things.

Again, at a gesture from one surgeon, the other cut open Deendayal's chest. He carved out some space round the heart, hoping to find a pulsating heart. But there was no heart to be seen or anything resembling a heart. Instead, they found a cobweb dangling from the place where the heart should have been. One of the surgeons delicately cut through a gossamer-thin section of the web. But the web still remained intact. When he cleared the entire

cobweb with the point of the kukri, a live spider came along with it. With great dexterity, the surgeons cleaned up Deendayal's skull, eyes, stomach, and the cavity in which his heart was supposed to be resting. Finally, they carefully sprinkled powder over them.

Just then a compounder entered, carrying some articles on a tray. The second surgeon quickly stepped aside while the first surgeon picked up a rolled bundle of files from the tray and shoving it into Deendayal's skull, sealed the gaping hole with a concave skull bone. Then he picked up Deendayal's officer's photographs from the tray and tightly deposited them in Deendayal's eye sockets. This done, he planted the corneas back in his eyes.

Then the surgeon sorted out the newspaper clippings relating to the increase in dearness allowance and the fall in the prices of commodities from the tray and pinning those clippings together stuffed them in Deendayal's stomach and sewed it up.

Next, he picked up a small piece of stone and placing it in the cavity where the heart was supposed to be, stitched up the chest.

In the end the surgeon picked up the soul-like reflection from the tray and pushed it down through the mouth. But before allowing him to get up from the operation table, they put two stitches on his tongue. Then they patted him on his back and helped him to sit up.

Deendayal stood up with alacrity, looking trim and fine. He bowed before his officers and saluted them smartly. As he was coming out, he heard the clerk calling out the next name... "Sadanand, age 25 years; disease...!"

THOSE NIGHTS

Haven't you heard the story of Shardabai, Sunderbai and Tarabai? Where have you been living? In some other country? If you hear these stories separately you may not be able to get the hang of them, for there is a common thread running through them.

Shardabai was as famous as Vasudata of Mathura was in her own time. The fame of her beauty, charm and youth had travelled to far off places.

Shardabai had just entered her fifteenth year when she suddenly came in the limelight. People were dazzled by her beauty; her beauty proclaimed itself to the world with the force of a drum beat. The renowned music *ustads* and dance masters vied with one another for the privilege of training her in these accomplishments. They were all convinced that before long, Shardabai would bewitch the whole world with her beauty and cover herself with glory. By linking their own names with hers they would bask in that borrowed glory. At last, ignoring all others in the running, Shardabai's mother selected the family *ustad* for the job; she was not inclined to break the family tradition.

When Shardabai had gained proficiency in all the arts germane to her profession, a formal announcement was made with great fanfare that she was ready to take the first momentous step into her business. Word went round that on the *basant* night, Shardabai would observe the formality of her first night. Soon rumours were rife as to who would do her the honour. There was all sorts of news, some good, some bad. Some said that someone had thrown a spanner in her way; others that even rajas and maharajas were

eager to jump into the fray. There was even a hilarious bit of news that a certain maharaja and his official treasurer had fallen out among themselves. The treasurer had refused to give the maharaja the required money because he was himself interested in spending the first night with Shardabai.

There was a silent tug-of-war going on between the nawabs, rajas, maharajas, rajkumars, zamindars and jagirdars for the privilege of spending the first night with Shardabai. It had become a question of prestige with each one of the contenders. As the day of *basant* approached, rumours snowballed. It was said that Shardabai's mother had unceremoniously turned away a raja or a nawab from her door and that the henchman of a taluqdar who had forcibly entered her house had been thrown out.

On the fateful day, all the big shots were dazed to learn that all of them were out of the running and that a spirited 18-year-old youth had triumphed over them. His name was Maganlal Chaganlal Derwal. He was having a whale of a good time at the cost of his multi-millionaire father who had loosened his purse-strings for his favourite son. He came of a renowned family which had a stake in a number of prestigious businesses. The family owned tea gardens in the Nilgiris and Darjeeling. They were also in business and played a dominant role in the cotton share market. Even the American share market kept an eye on Derwal's moves in the share market. Besides, he had a major share in many businesses in Java, Sumatra and Africa.

Actually, these facts came to the surface only when the rajas and maharajas were trounced; otherwise, no one, particularly in this context, would have known that Derwal was a name to reckon with. Now Maganlal Chaganlal's name rang in the air and people praised Shardabai for her judicious selection. On *basant* day, Shardabai found herself in a *kothi* in Darjeeling where she spent her first night with Maganlal Chaganlal.

At that time Shardabai was 16 years old and Maganlal Chaganlal was 18.

We are talking of the years when a puny Japan had defeated the mighty Russia in war and politics in India had taken a new turn. In

the terrible winter of 1914 the Indian forces were giving a good account of themselves on the battlefields of Flanders and France. In our own country, Surendranath Banerjee and Mrs. Annie Besant had just appeared on the political horizon. Gokhale had passed away and Tilak had been released from the Mandalay jail. After passing the period of his exile in America, Lala Lajpat Rai had raised the slogan of Home Rule. The British had defeated the Germans but in India the agitation had mounted against them, culminating in the Rowlatt Bill.

Then Mahatma Gandhi had called a halt to his satyagraha. A terrible carnage took place in the Jallianwala Bagh. Mahatma Gandhi was operated upon for appendicitis and Motilal Nehru raised the issue of Swaraj. A little later, the Simon Commission was boycotted. At the Lahore session of the Congress, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru infused a new spirit in the people of the country. Pandit Motilal and Lala Lajpat Rai had passed away. There was the historic Dandi march and the salt movement. There was a severe earthquake in Bihar in which thousands of people perished and lakhs of them became homeless.

Much had happened during these 18 years, but they had just passed by Shardabai. After her first night Shardabai had not looked askance at entertaining a middle class clientele. Perhaps Maganlal had no time to think of Shardabai. It was just one night and how long does it take for one night to pass?

By now the family business was in Maganlal's hands; he was at the helm of affairs. He had married into another multi-millionaire family. His father having passed away, he had inherited all his wealth.

At the time, Shardabai's daughter Sunderbai was much in the news. They said the daughter had excelled her mother in beauty, leaving her many miles behind. Those who had seen Shardabai in the prime of her youth said even at that time she was no match for Sunderbai.

Sunderbai had just turned 17 when her mother decided to fix her daughter's first night.

Again, the nawabs, rajas, maharajas vied with each other for the privilege of spending the first night with Sunderbai. As before, the day of *basant* was fixed for the purpose.

The people were dazed when they learnt that all the nawabs, rajas and the maharajas had to eat humble pie. A rich man of 35 had scored over them. His name was Seth Maganlal Chaganlal Derwal.

Shardabai thanked her good fortune and advised her daughter about the tastes and eccentricities of the seth. She briefed her on many subtle points and gloated over the bright future that lay in store for her daughter.

Sunderbai spent her first night with Maganlal in his bungalow at Ooty.

At that time Sunderbai was 17 and Maganlal 35. It was the time when the devastating Quetta earthquake was still fresh in people's minds. Italy had invaded Abyssinia. King George V was dead and Edward VIII had ascended the British throne. In the Kremlin 2,040 representatives had assembled to deliberate over the new constitution. At the Faizpur Congress session, Jawaharlal welcomed Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and M.N. Roy. He warned the country of the impending war. General Elections were held in which the Congress gained a majority in five provinces, two crore and 80 lakh voters having exercised their franchise. Subhas Bose was elected president of the Congress at its Haripur session. The clouds of war loomed large. The Second World War came. It culminated in the atomic bomb for Pakistan. In 1942, the Quit India movement was launched. India gained freedom, bringing in the people's rule. Mahatma Gandhi fell to an assassin's bullet. India was proclaimed a Republic.

These events left untouched Shardabai's family which had become a by-word in the red-light district. Surprisingly, every time a girl was born in the family, she was more beautiful than her mother. In the meanwhile, Seth Maganlal Chaganlal had become a still greater name in the business world. Besides tea, jute, cotton, banking and exports, he had added many new lines to his business. Everything that he touched turned to gold. He represented the

business community on many official bodies. From Maganlal Chaganlal he had now become Seth M.C. Derwal.

In the meanwhile, Sunderbai's daughter Tarabai had attained the age of 16 and the fame of her beauty had spread far and wide. When the date of her first night was formally announced it created quite a stir. The taluqdars, jagirdars, rajas and maharajas had disappeared from the scene. So everyone was keen to hear the name of the lucky one who was expected to be from among the nouveau riche.

The day of decision arrived. It came to the people as a shock that the nouveau riche, the VIPs, the business magnates, the high income-tax functionaries, the leading contractors — all who were contending for the privilege of spending the night with Tarabai had fallen by the wayside. A 51-year-old multi-millionaire seth had carried the day. His name was Seth M.C. Derwal.

She was 17 years old at that time and the Seth, 51.

This was the time when a cold war was going on between Russia and America. Atom bombs were being tested. There was something akin to a revolution in France. India was passing through a phase of economic resurgence. The Bandung Conference had caught the attention of the world. The foundation of *Panch Sheel* were laid and there was a surge of awakening among the nonaligned countries. Tibet had undergone a cataclysmic change, the Vietnam war of liberation had taken a new turn, China had invaded India. Pandit Nehru had passed away. Pakistan had attacked India, ending in the Tashkent Agreement at which Lal Bahadur Shastri had suddenly died. Indira Gandhi had become the next Prime Minister of India.

By now Tarabai's daughter, Geetabai had attained the age of 15 and as was expected, a formal announcement was made for her first night. But this time the people did not evince much interest. They had already guessed who would spend the first night with Geetabai and where.

HOW MANY PAKISTANS?

What a long journey! And I fail to understand why Pakistan imposes itself upon me again and again.

Salima, have I ever been unfair to you? Then why are you taking it out on yourself? You laugh. But I know it is a barbed laughter tinged with poison. Your laughter has no touch of henna bushes whose buds blossom in the gentle breeze under the moonlight. I am amused at the very thought of it. Salima, do you remember those days when you had once said, "Like the breeze, I am also fancy-free and sometimes even touched in the head."

Of course, you do remember all that. Women never forget. They only make a pretence of forgetting. If they did not, life would have become unbearable. I feel so odd when I call you Salima or even think of you as a woman. I would instead like to call you Banno, the girl who used to bring henna flowers near my nose and blow at them. "They give out fragrance only when you blow at them," she used to say. I would feel intoxicated; Banno, a little touched in the head. Banno, now I hesitate to call you by that name. I wonder if you yourself like this name or not. But why be so punctilious? What's there in a name, after all?

That night I felt like climbing up your stairs and ferret out something from you. I just wanted to draw you out on something. But then I realised that there was hardly anything that could be pulled out from the limbo of your mind.

Oh God, who can tell how many more Pakistans have come into being with the creation of that Pakistan? It is such a mix-up. Instead of getting disentangled things have become more bewildering.

That night was no different from other nights. God knows whether it was the peepul tree behind our house or Badru Mian who had said, "Qadir Mian, this blasted Pakistan has at last come into being, this sister-lover Pakistan..."

How horrendous was that moonlit night. You were lying in the courtyard down below, bathed in moonlight while one could hear the peepul tree behind the house rustling in the breeze. And then as if from the nether world had come Badru Mian's voice, "Qadir Mian, this blighted Pakistan has come into being."

Friend, there are three stages in this long journey. The first was when the fragrance of the henna buds went to my head. The second, when I saw Banno stark naked in the moonlight. The third, when standing on the other side of the door Banno had asked me, "Is there anyone else with you?"

Yes, there was. There was one...

Banno, how was it that that blind, wavering moment had ended in a laugh? What harm had I done you? Why this streak of vengeance? And on whom? Was it, me, Muneer or this Pakistan? Whom were you trying to humiliate? Me, yourself, Muneer, or...?

Why must this Pakistan come between us. It denotes no country to you or to me. Its only an appellation given to a dreadful reality which throws us apart and then draws a wedge of silence between us, making others insensitive to the members of each others' family, community, religion. Perhaps it is this lack of feeling that has assumed the name of Pakistan. It is like the henna flowers without hue and devoid of fragrance.

Listen, had it not been so, why would I have left Chinar only to live the life of a nomad — the same Chinar which abounds in henna, near the compound of the Mission School where we sat under a peepul tree on the bank of the Ganga or whiled away our time eating tamarind sitting on the broken rampart of the Bhartari Hari Fort. I can never forget that evening when Compounder Zamin Ali had come to my Grandfather and said, "Though there does not seem to be any truth in it yet it will be difficult to convince people. Better send Mangal away from here for a few days. If he remains here people will continue to talk about his affair with

Banno. Their marriage is out of the question. On the other hand it can only aggravate matters and end in a communal riot."

You can't understand how bad I had felt about it. How could I ever think of leaving Chinar. But I had to leave it. Those Chinar nights, the flowing water of the Ganga, the boats loaded with pilgrims bound for Kashi, the ruins of the Bhartari Hari Fort, the octroi post where I used to sit and watch Banno's blandishments, the lanes fissured by the receding flood waters through which Banno used to make vain attempts to reach the river bank. Oh, how I used to wait and wait for her.

Little did we realize that they had now taken us for adults and looked askance at our meetings.

It had never occurred to us that our meetings could create communal tension. But that was how things were. Not that we had any inkling of it. How could we, for that matter. We had never talked to each other after that.

We crossed all the three stages without being the wiser. We never paused to talk to each other. Not even when the fragrance of the henna buds permeating the air in the moonlight went to our heads. Or when I saw her naked in the moonlight. Nor even when she had asked me, "Is there someone else with you?"

Chinar! Where you and I had our houses. The brick-paved lane which passing through the bazaar ran along the river bank and terminated at the gate of the old Bhartari Hari Fort.

The octroi post was situated at the turning of the road leading to the fort. It was at this octroi post that the passengers getting down from the boats at the Ganga ghat paid their octroi duty. The octroi clerk, mumbling Ram's name under his breath all the time, took the duty in kind, comprising fish, crabs, mangoes and the like, made votive offering of holy water ten times a day to the idol of Lord Shiva installed under the peepul tree and then repaired to his shed where four children would be waiting under its thatched roof to be coached by him.

The road bifurcated near the octroi post, its one off-shoot leading to the fort and the other to a *kuchcha* path which was a virtual web of channels whose water was absorbed by the river sands. I called them Banno's lanes.

At the termination of Banno's lanes a cobbled path took off to the Mission School, housed in an old bungalow dating back to the early British days. The path to the bungalow was lined by a long henna hedge and there was a growth of wild belladonna bushes in a maidan beyond the hedge.

These belladonna bushes were a source of great anxiety to me. When feelings ran high in the town on account of our affair, Banno one day managed to come to the octroi post and said, "Mangal, if Maulvi Saheb's flunkies take the law in their own hands and try to clip my wings, I'll swallow belladonna and go to sleep. Don't play a coward and try to desert me. If you do, don't forget that the Ganga flows nearby."

But she was gone before I could lay bare my heart to her and explain how things stood. Our house was in turmoil. People whom Grandfather did not even recognize would threaten him while he was passing through the bazaar. He feared that one day I may be done to death or one night the Muslims may invade our house.

Banno, Pakistan had already come into being but your father, the drill master was engrossed in writing the story of Raja Bhartari Hari, dwelling upon his teachings and extolling his virtues and sense of renunciation.

"He's gone crazy, this drill master of ours," the people would say. "Imagine, a Muslim writing in praise of a Hindu Raja! He could not be a Turk. He must be a low caste convert to Islam." It was only then that it had dawned upon me that there are Muslims and Muslims. The real Muslims, it was said, were those whose ancestors had directly migrated from Iran and Turkey and had settled down here. The local Muslims had ostracised Banno's father and had suddenly become conscious of Banno's welfare as if they were her real guardians. They had openly turned hostile to her father.

Banno didn't know about the lay of the land but I did. Banno's father was a harmless man who believed in toeing the line in

keeping with the Maulvi's dictate. He never took a bold stand based on his convictions. One day he came to Grandfather on the sly and cried bitterly. But he continued to write the story of Bhartari Hari without anybody getting wind of it. I came to know about it only, when finding myself at a dead end I had decided to leave the town. I was passing by the octroi post for the last time when the octroi clerk slipped a paper in my perspiring hand.

It was a frightfully dark night. There was fear in every heart for death seemed to be lurking everywhere. Shouts of "Ya Ali, Ya Ali!" triggered off trouble, bringing bloodshed in its wake. Even the Ganga was in spate that night and the peepul tree on its bank was swaying restlessly. A fierce wind was whistling through the ruins of the fort. My Grandfather had escorted me to the railway station with the help of half a dozen Hindu youths so that I could get into the train without any mishap.

They had decided to send me to Jaunpur to stay with my maternal uncle. Ultimately, it was decided to pack me off to Bombay to seek a job in the railway workshop where an uncle of mine was employed.

Banno, what a dreadful night it was. I was turning my back on my own home in utter disgrace. My mind was torn by a fierce conflict. At times I thought that I should go back, pick up a hatchet and put all those Muslims of yours to death and snatch you away from their hands. I said to myself that if I failed in my mission I would kill you and then drown myself in the Ganga.

The town lay in a swoon. As I have said, I was escorted to the railway station by half a dozen Hindu youths. Avoiding the bazaar road we had taken the deserted Fort road to the station. The octroi clerk, lantern in hand, had slipped a paper in my hand on the sly. The parcel train, the last train of the night was scheduled to leave at two-thirty by which I would travel upto Mughal Serai. My Grandfather was on tenterhooks. My comrades felt scared and humiliated and at the same time vengeful, ready to wipe out all Muslims if they could have their way. It was apprehended that the Hindus would start a riot in the morning as soon as these youths returned from the station. Banno, how painful it can be for a

Hindu to be a Hindu. The parting that night was extremely painful. There was a chill in the air. The railway platform was very cold. The Vindhya hills and the pine trees across the railway station seemed to be brooding in silence.

How to tell you all this? After being thrown out of my own town in utter humiliation I had lost all peace of mind. I still remembered those lanes along which Banno used to come to meet me. I would keep waiting for her at the octroi post and then getting impatient, I would traverse the same lanes and on seeing the henna flowers I would console myself by thinking that Banno must have come thus far before retracing her steps. Maybe somebody have stopped her from coming. To tell you the truth, for me it was only then that Pakistan had come into existence. It had pierced through my heart like a dagger. The breeze over the town seemed to have been lulled into immobility, leaving Banno marooned within the four corners of the town. As for myself, I had reached the point of no return. Even if Banno had been restored to me at that time, she would have perhaps meant nothing to me — so befuddled and woebegone was I.

I read that piece of paper while travelling by the parcel train. I realised that like the drill master she too had no words of comfort for me. I learnt from the same piece of paper that the drill master was relentlessly continuing with the writing of Bhartari Hari.

The train was hurtling along, increasingly making me a stranger to my own town. Never again did I feel the urge to return home.

I could realize that the drill master must be feeling stifled in Chinari. I was not so sure about Banno though. I was sure of only one thing — that she couldn't have drowned herself in the Ganga. She must still be there, happy or unhappy, warming someone's bed like a devoted wife. She must have relegated everything to some corner of her memory, never to be recalled again and what she could not forget would have transformed itself into Pakistan, bringing time itself to a stop.

Well, Banno, what had to happen had already come to pass. From Mughal Serai I came to Allahabad and then on to Bombay. My uncle found work for me at the Kurla Railway Workshop. After

working there for sometime I went away to Poona where I sought employment in a hospital workshop manufacturing artificial limbs. I had a strong feeling that I would not be able to feel at home at Chinari, nor would my people be able to live there in peace. And nor Banno for that matter.

The fact was that everybody seemed to have lost interest in Chinari. When a Pakistan comes into existence a part of man turns to wood. The crops wither, the sky is sundered, the clouds become empty and the wind ceases to blow.

After many years, I had a letter from Grandfather saying that he had migrated to Bhiwandi along with some families of farmhands and carpenters in search of pastures new, hoping that they may once again come across green fields, a blue sky and rain-laden clouds. I learnt a little later that Banno's family had also come along. But what opening could a drill master have in Bhiwandi? Grandfather's change of place made some sense to me. He did business in cotton cloth. The place offered good prospects to carpenters also. But as for Banno's father, it was neither here nor there.

I came to know about Banno from Grandfather when he came on a visit to Poona. He told me in passing that the drill master had also come to Bhiwandi with him and had got a job at a local school, adding that Banno had been married to a youngman who worked on handloom and was good at weaving silk cloth.

From Grandfather's perfunctory manner I could see that he was trying to sound very casual. But he had completely blacked out the information that Banno's family was also living in the same house — Grandfather on the ground floor and the drill master on the upper floor.

In one of my weaker moments I felt like visiting Bhiwandi and meeting them all. But then I realized that Banno was now a married woman and it could create an embarrassing situation. Moreover, Grandfather had also thrown a subtle hint that it would not be advisable for me to visit the place under the circumstances and I had accordingly desisted.

And what if I went there and gave vent to my pent up feelings despite myself? In that case another Pakistan would have exploded in my heart and I could have barged into Banno's room in a fit of fury.

Soon Bhiwandi was also caught in the tentacles of rioting. Of course, Banno and I had no hand in it. The miasma of distrust had also spread there. Five years ago I could have been the cause of such rioting. But now I was nowhere in the picture. I had desisted from visiting Bhiwandi for the simple reason that Banno's sight may trigger off another riot from my side.

Yes, I did see Banno after all. But under what bizarre circumstances!

I reached Bhiwandi a fortnight after the riots. As I entered the town I noticed heaps of debris and charred houses huddled together as if they were still tense with fear. The air still smelt of ashes. An acrid smell mixed with the smell of burnt earth pricked my nostrils.

Surely, you must have also smelt it. Is there anyone in this country who is not familiar with the smell of ashes? It was late in the evening when I slighted at the bus stand. It was all quiet without a sign of panic anywhere. Three policemen were standing under a big cinema hoarding, chatting among themselves. Most of the buses were empty and standing silent as if they were done for the day. Even the Shirdhi bus, which was always full, was waiting for passengers. There were no taxis bound for Thane. The roads were deserted. There was some sign of activity only in the nearby dak bungalow where the Collector was camping.

What is it like walking through a riot-torn town? You might have some experience of it. The whole place looks so desolate and deserted and there is an oppressive feeling of uncanny quiet. One sees and yet sees nothing. Why does one become so insensate? Why do all human bonds seem to snap?

It is a small town and yet it had become difficult to seek directions to our house. Anyhow, I managed to find the house. But everything was steeped in silence. Could human life exist in such sinister silence?

Banno, I know that the drill master, your husband Muneer and my people would all be there in the house. But the upper storey of the house was plunged in darkness. Had it not been a moonlit night I would have been scared out of my wits.

The door was ajar and I stepped into the courtyard. There were two water pitchers lying in a corner. By their side were sprawled two shadows, apparently of two women, one of them naked upto her waist. The other woman sitting very close to the first would move her hand over her neck and then it would slip over her bare bosom and down to her waist. I failed to understand what this woman was upto but I could distinctly make out the contours of a naked female form. I retreated in fright.

I had just come out when I encountered the drill master who took no time to recognise me. But he stood there like a dumb creature, not knowing how to greet me. What kind of overture should he make? Allude to the years gone by? About his relationship? But before he could open his mouth, I asked him about my Grandfather in the tone of one addressing a stranger.

"He left for Chinar, the day before," the drill master said.

"The day before?" I repeated in disbelief.

"Yes, he did not stay back. Many other families have also gone away."

I suddenly realised that in spite of all that had happened Grandfather could still opt for Chinar, but not the drill master. Unlike me and my Grandfather he had left Chinar for very different reasons. The drill master had in a way been exiled due to adverse circumstances and it is not easy to swim against the tide. As for me, it was only a handful of people who had turned hostile to me.

I was in a quandry. How was I to conduct myself in the absence of my people? Seek asylum in an unfamiliar riot-torn city? Banno being there the drill master would have looked askance at the idea of putting me up with him for the night. On the other hand he

could not brush me aside either as a derelict in an unknown city. He had still some sense of propriety left in him.

"Has Grandfather taken all his things with him?" I asked.

"Most of his things are still here."

"Has he locked up his rooms?"

"Yes. But I've a duplicate key," he said hesitatingly.

"In that case I would like to stay here for the night. I have to return tomorrow evening." I was almost gate-crashing, the manner in which I was forcing myself upon the drill master. But I had no choice, being a stranger to the city.

The drill master went in and returned with a key and a candle. He led me upstairs by a side staircase. He opened the door to let me in. "Have you eaten?" he asked.

"Yes," I said and went into the room.

"Do tell me if you need anything." Without waiting for any answer he descended the stairs. The author of Bhartari Hari was shrewd enough to know how to make his moves. He had used the expression 'tell me' and not 'ask me'.

Banno, what a strange night it was. You didn't even know that I was there. The drill master couldn't have told you about it. If the police had not raided our house early next morning, you would have never known whose shadow had kept hovering over the terrace all night.

It was a moonlit night, windless and still. I decided to take my charpoy to the terrace and sleep in the open. As I lay there I kept waiting to hear footsteps, hoping that you may come up on the sly.

The tree behind the house was bathed in moonlight. My charpoy was resting at a place from where I could command a view of the courtyard below. What I saw took my breath away.

There were two charpoys in the courtyard, one occupied by Banno and the other by her mother. My heart missed a beat on seeing Banno lying there. The moonlight was pouring over the courtyard and Banno was lying under it, with her sari pulled down and her breasts uncovered. Her exposed breasts were like full-blown balloons. She lay writhing like a half-dead fish.

"*Hai Allah!*" It was Banno groaning.

"Try to sleep, Banno," I heard her mother pleading with her.

"They are going to burst," Banno wailed and held her breasts in her hands as if she was going to crush them.

Her mother got up and coming over to her, she said, "Let me squeeze them." She pressed Banno's breasts and the milk came out of them in jets, drenching her naked body, the pearly drops trickling down her waist.

What a sight it was! I was stunned. Life seemed to be ebbing out of my body out of fear.

I kept pacing on the terrace long into the night, my mind full of remorse at having seen what I should not have seen. Then I fell asleep and saw youthful breasts hanging all over the sky.

I had just slid into sleep when I heard some noise in the neighbourhood. I heard someone's wails rising above the pervading noise followed by the cry, "Qadir Mian, your Pakistan has come into being. The accursed one is born!"

Had there not been the sacred peepul tree in the neighbourhood, I would have thought it was a ghost's voice coming from the nether regions and I would have made a bid for escape. But I had seen such weird scenes during this short time that I could no longer trust my eyes. I saw the sky raining blood and dead bodies running in the dark and blood sprouting from headless torsos. There were people dancing naked in the bazaar.

My head was heavy as I woke up in the morning. Two hours before my scheduled departure the drill master came up and said, "There are some policemen looking for you."

"Why?" I asked.

"They have orders to interrogate every visitor to the city."

I was beside myself with rage. Did anyone ask my particulars when I was driven out of my own town at an ungodly hour?

Banno, what is Pakistan? It has its abode in the mind and manifests itself when one fails to understand man in his fullness, in his entirety and conceives of him as a lop-sided entity under the stress of time.

The police took me to the police station where I was grilled. They wanted to know what had brought me here. What could I tell

them? Why does one visit places? The police would have kept harassing me endlessly had not the drill master turned up and answered all the questions to their satisfaction. That the drill master was a Muslim lent authenticity to the whole thing.

After having finished with the police we went out and sat down on a log of wood lying by the side of the road to collect our wits. It was then that the drill master told me about Badru. "He has gone out of his mind," the drill master said. "He has been sitting under the peepul tree ever since the riots broke out. He has destroyed all his forty handlooms. Didn't you hear him calling out to Qadir Mian?"

"And your family? Is everything all right with your family?" I asked the drill master.

It was then that he blurted out everything about Banno. "She's not too well," he said. "She gave birth to a baby three days before the riots started. She was admitted to Dr Sarang's nursing home. The rioters set fire to the nursing home and the mothers with their new-born babies had to jump from the first floor to save their lives. There were nine mothers, two of whom along with five babies perished while jumping down. Banno too lost her baby while trying to jump down from the roof. Somehow we rescued her and brought her home. She is better now but the milk in her breasts is creating a hell of a problem."

We sat in silence for a while. "I think I should be going to Poona," I said at last, trying to find an excuse to get away from there.

"If you can make it, better go to Chinara instead," the drill master said. "Your Grandfather may be looking forward to meeting you."

"Why, is he unwell?"

"Yes, he lost one of his arms. It was the rioters' doing. They had come to attack us and there was a pitched battle right in front of our house. But for your Grandfather none of us would have been living today. He rushed into the street and in the melee the rioters chopped off his arm. But he continued to face them, using his own chopped arm as a weapon. He continued fighting till he fell down

unconscious. He was treated in the hospital and on being discharged decided to visit Chinara."

"What about his arm?" I asked shaken to my very core. The news was too much for me.

"His one arm is missing but he is alright otherwise. He said that he would continue with the treatment at Chinara. God is merciful. You must go and look him up." The drill master covered his face with his hands.

It was such a bewildering turn of events that I feared I would go out of my mind. In which world was I living? Who were these people? Were they really men or ghosts who had stepped out of dreams?

I came back to my room and lay down on the bed. The drill master had returned to his quarters. Then I heard some voices coming from the courtyard below. Banno, her mother, father and Muneer were having an argument.

"Why are you hellbent upon living here? I just don't understand it." It was Muneer speaking.

"You'll never understand," Banno retorted. "I lost my child in this soil and I must get it back from this very soil before I leave. Then I'll go with you wherever you take me."

I peeped through the railing. A lean and thin Muneer was trembling with rage. "Do whatever you like for all I care," he fumed. "Go and beget a child from anyone you please."

I was dumbfounded. Was Muneer alluding to me? Maybe I had got him wrong. Banno spoke again, her voice shaking with rage. "As if you are capable of giving me a child! All you are good for is selling your blood and buying hooch with the money."

Smack! Perhaps Muneer had slapped Banno. There was an exchange of hot words between them. "Don't I know?" Banno shouted back at Muneer. "The reason why you make these frequent trips to Bombay? It's to sell your blood and buy liquor with the money. Then you lie in your bed shivering the whole night."

What was I hearing? A Pakistan seemed to be shedding tears within me. Everyone was harbouring a Pakistan in his heart. To nag

him, to torment him and tear him apart, bit by bit, reducing him to a cripple.

Oh, how dreadful that moonlit night was! Overcast with gloom. I left Bhiwandi unceremoniously the same way I had stolen out of Chinar. I found a taxi going to Thane and got into it. From Thane I took a bus to Bombay and then on to Poona by train. I got fever in Poona and stayed in bed for several days.

Banno, I wanted to forget everything. I wanted to retire into my shell to divine what I really was. How meaningless a life's journey can be. Though bloodied and crippled, man still lives on.

If in this desolate loneliness a cry rings through the darkness, "Is anyone else there?" how would man respond to it? No one knows for certain, not even you, Banno.

About five months had passed when I learnt from my Grandfather that he had returned to Bhiwandi. The Sindhis and the Marwaris having entered business in the meanwhile, Grandfather was not doing too well in his business. The market was generally dull. A large number of handlooms had become idle. Since he had lost one of his arms, Grandfather's movement had become stilted and unbalanced. In one of his letters he had remarked in a light-hearted vein that he had been nicknamed *Tonta*. He hadn't much to tell except that Muneer had gone away to Bombay with Banno. He didn't know whether he was still in Bombay or had migrated to Pakistan. The drill master, he wrote to me, had become slightly demented. He performed drill at home and wrote the story of Bhartari Hari at school.

If I had not come to Bombay that day, maybe I would have never chanced upon Banno. And what a painful meeting it was. I have always regretted it. She must have formed a very wrong impression about me, and would have wondered whether she was really responsible for my waywardness.

I was passing through Bombay on my way to Bhiwandi. At the station, just by chance I ran into Kedar, an old Bombay friend. We

decided to spend the evening together. You had nothing to do with that evening for you were far from my mind at that time. We had a few drinks in a drinking joint at Colaba after which we came out for a leisurely stroll and stopped in front of Handloom House from where we entered a side line and after walking for some five minutes stood before a tall building. It was a sort of a Bohra locality, very open and clean.

The building had a lift, though there was also a flight of stairs leading upto the top story. Kedar and I opted for the stairs. I was out of breath by the time I had made it to the fifth floor. The smell of cooking food was wafting through the windows. After a brief pause for breath we resumed our climb to the sixth floor. Kedar pressed the call bell. The place did not look very clean.

As the door opened we found ourselves before a Sindhi, both of us still panting. The room that the Sindhi led us into was sparsely furnished, with cheap sofas resting against the walls. The Sindhi kept breathing heavily. I feared his breath may expire any moment, never to return.

I was feeling restless and went to the window for a breath of fresh air. I could see dirty roof tops stretching far into the distance. The Sindhi placed a bottle of Coca Cola before me and then took Kedar to a corner where I had a fleeting glimpse of a woman in a black veil. But from where I sat I could not hear what they were talking about.

The two disappeared and after a minute or two I could hear Kedar's sound of laughter from the adjoining room.

The Sindhi reappeared after a while, still breathing heavily and asked me, "Beer? Care to...?" The rest of the words were carried away by his breath.

"I won't mind," I said.

The Sindhi asked a boy to fetch a bottle of beer. He did not join me.

"You... Bombay?" he asked controlling his breath.

"I'm coming from Poona," I replied.

"For pleasure?" he asked breathing hard.

"No, I had some work here."

"Business?"

"No, something personal. I'm on my way to Bhiwandi."

The Sindhi sat there breathing heavily. Suddenly Kedar showed up and the Sindhi rose to his feet laboriously and swaying heavily as if caught unawares. Feeling uneasy, I gulped down the remaining beer. Kedar was paying for my beer when the door of the adjoining room opened and a female hand held out a bunch of keys before Kedar. Seeing me standing beside the Sindhi whose chest was working like bellows the woman's voice asked, "Anyone else?"

I turned around. Your hand was resting on the door frame, Banno, you were standing there in a petticoat and a blouse. It was your voice, asking, "Anyone else?"

Yes, there was. Someone else was very much there.

After a blind, tremulous moment you had recognised me. Your lips suddenly curled in a venomous smile, dripping contempt and poison. Or was it only a figment of my imagination?

I wish I knew who you were taking it on, me, Muneer, Pakistan?

I came down the stairs, Kedar close on my heels. I felt like climbing up the stairs again to ask you, "Banno, was this how it was destined to end?"

Where should I go now? Which place, which town, which city? Skipping from place to place could I ultimately land somewhere out of reach of Pakistan? A place where I can live in the fullness of life with all my longing and wishes in full bloom.

But that is not to be, Banno. I find Pakistan at every step. It plunges a knife in your body and mine, Banno. While we bleed we feel so let down and humiliated. But it goes on pummelling us.

THE WORLD OF THE DEAD

Summer had set in. A public *piau* had been set up by the well, opposite the bus stand, to serve water to the thirsty. Narain Pandit had placed four large, wide-mouthed earthen pitchers by his side. He would pour water into a pipe made from a bamboo stem. The passers-by, bending under the pipe, would drink from cupped hands and go their way. Most of the time one saw three or four buses standing under the nearby tamarind tree, one of them always under repair.

It was known as the Itah-Kurwali bus stand, conspicuous for its adjoining stone masons' shops where they chiselled away at red stone slabs, shaping them into mill-stones, pestles and mortars and the like. When off-duty, the drivers and cleaners would sleep on bus cushions under the shade of the tamarind tree or play cards.

With the departure of the last bus the bus stand had become quiet. Narain Pandit yawned, uttering a "hai Ram!" which was distorted into "haram". Nisar wearing a knitted bunian and sitting erect on his haunches on a wooden plank was feeding beans to his goat. He suddenly stopped as Narain Pandit's "haram" fell on his ears. "Maharaj! let me taste your tobacco," he said. "I'm told it's excellent. Give me some lime paste too if you haven't licked your box clean!"

"Keep to your own manure-like stuff," Narain Pandit snapped. "My tobacco is too good for your gaping mouth. Its taste will be lost on your tongue like a tiny grain in a camel's jaw!"

"What a niggard you're, Maharaj!" Nisar said. "Your heart is no bigger than a thimble that you can't even part with a pinch of tobacco." He hitched up his *tehmet* and started feeding his goat.

He saw the contractor hurrying down the paved road.

"Nisar Mian, when is the bus from Kurwali due to arrive?" he asked.

Nisar cast a perfunctory glance at the contractor and plucked a handful of beans from the dry stalk he was holding. The stalk jingled like ankle bells.

"Are you listening," the contractor repeated. "When will the bus from Kurwali arrive?"

"That's the way to speak," Nisar eyed the contractor. "There's no need to add Mian to my name." Then he rolled his eyes as if saying to himself, how the fellow bleated all the time. "Well, it'll be here in half an hour. It may even take an hour. Are you expecting some one?"

"Yes." The contractor proceeded towards the *piau*.

Nisar rubbed the goat's sides, pressed its hind legs and making a clucking sound, thumped its thighs.

Nisar was very fond of the animal. Nur — that was the name he had given it. It walked with mincing steps, throwing its full weight on its black hoofs, like the strong-limbed Chinese women of old walking on their small, bound feet.

Conscious of its master's admiring look, Nur craned its neck with the imperious dignity of a lion. Nisar picked it up in his arms. "Live long, my cub, my brave one!" he said in a cloying, throaty voice.

The card players under the tamarind tree had started quarrelling. It had started with Raja Ram. Driver Nathu Singh tried to collar him. "You're a cheat," he cried. "On top of that you call me names. I'll suck your blood."

"Be fair!" Raja Ram cried, taking shelter behind a hefty driver. "I never abused you. You punched me first!"

"Don't bleat like a woman!" Nisar shouted from where he was standing. "Be a man! Face him, if he has called you a cheat. Don't hide like a woman!"

Nisar's admonition worked. Other players intervened and they stopped quarrelling. And then they saw a bus hurtling down the road in blazing heat, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

There was a flurry of activity at the bus stand. The ice vendors hurriedly lined up their hand-carts along the road. They sprinkled water over aerated water bottles, struck chisels over slabs of ice, and wiped them clean of saw dust with ragged cloth dusters. The bus stand had come alive.

Covered with dust, the bus came lurching and stopped with a growl.

Brushing off dust from their coarse vests and holding oil-fed lathis at the ends of which hung small bundles of food, the villagers climbed down the bus. She was the last to get down.

"This way, Savitri!" The contractor guided his daughter through the crowd. "Lallua has not come with you?"

Nisar's eyes travelled to Savitri and remained fixed on her face. Buxom, tall, upturned nose, hair tightly swept back, lines of red *missi* showing between her teeth, coloured glass bangles on her fleshy wrists and strong, hard hands. The cleaners whispered among themselves and gave leering looks. As she passed by, the ice-vendors shouted: "Soda, lemonade, lime juice, iced water!"

Admiration peeped from Nisar's eyes. He took out his embroidered *kurta* from his tool box and putting it on, rolled up its sleeves. The contractor picked up Savitri's tin box.

"You've been walking in the sun all day, Contractor Saheb," Nisar said. "Have some rest. Let the afternoon cool down a bit."

Savitri looked at Nisar as she passed by him. She had a manly walk as if the loose pebbles on the road would sink into it under her firm, steady steps. Nisar smacked his lips.

The noise at the bus stand gradually died. The bus started and leaving a trail of smoke behind, stopped under the tamarind tree. Another bus took its place. Passengers started getting in. Between the honking of the horn one could hear Nisar's voice. "Itah-Kurwali! Hurry up! Itah-Kurwali!" His throat dried up. Kicking away the mud-smeared pariah dogs, he lowered his head under the *piau*.

"Perhaps this woman is the contractor's daughter," Narain Pandit said, as if recalling something, while pouring water in

Nisar's cupped hands. "She was widowed three years ago. Her in-laws live in a village four miles from here."

Nisar perked up his ears. "She had a hand in her husband's murder," Pandit continued in a reminiscent vein. "But she got away scot-free. This woman has guts!"

In the evening, while going to his hut with Nur, Nisar stopped short in front of the contractor's house. A she-goat was tied under his shed. Savitri, who was carrying an armful of peepul leaves to the shed stopped on seeing Nisar.

"When did the contractor buy this goat?" Nisar asked, quailing under her gaze.

Her stance suddenly changed and a scowl appeared on her face. "Doesn't look older than one year," she tossed the information at him as if his question had no importance for her.

Holding the goat's jaws she pressed open her mouth to look at her teeth. Then she turned the animal's head towards Nisar. "Yes, couldn't be more than one year, what do you think?"

Seizing the cue with alacrity, Nisar stepped forward and looked at the animal's teeth with the air of a connoisseur.

"A he-goat?" Savitri asked, pointing towards Nur. "What good is a he-goat? A butcher may give you fifty rupees for it. At the most sixty. A she-goat is preferable any time. She gives milk. If you had kept a she-goat your body would have glistened with fat."

"A lone bird like me has no time to bother about a she-goat," Nisar said. "I haven't kept Nur to sell. It's a male. Keeps company with me the whole day."

In the meanwhile the contractor came and they gossipped for a while. When Nisar returned to his hut, Savitri was no longer a stranger to him. "She's one in a thousand!" Nisar said to himself. "How freely she talks! And how she moves about! With not a care in the world."

After putting the passengers in the bus for which he was working and receiving his commission from the bus owner, Nisar would repair to Savitri's house. Savitri was generally alone in the house though at

times he found other people too with whom she had picked up an acquaintance. Tongues had started wagging about Savitri and Nisar. That afternoon Nisar was alone with Savitri. The thatched door had been drawn against the shed to keep the *loo* out. Wearing a thin, old dhoti, Savitri was sitting by his side stitching buttons on her vest. Nisar's eyes gleamed as they roved over her body. Then unable to hold himself any longer he put his hands over her arm. His fingers went round her arm, his two thumbs standing out like horns over her flesh. He pressed her elbow down on the ground. "Look at your arm," he said. "It's not half as thick as I thought. Do you call this flesh or dough? See how flabby it is!"

"What have you got to do with my arm?" Savitri said, incensed. "Whether it's iron or dough how does it concern you?" Then she started laughing. Nisar's eyebrows went up.

Gorakh came in, pushing aside the door. He hesitated and looked at them, embarrassed. Then he rolled his eyes and gave Nisar a mocking smile. "Is the contractor not at home?" he asked.

Nisar had removed his hands from Savitri's arm but his fingers were still tingling. Savitri shifted her leg. "Nisar, give a pull to my foot," she said, wiggling her toes. "I seem to have pulled a muscle." Then she jerked her foot and sat up straight.

"*Arre Mian*, that Bachchan was looking for you at the bus stand," Gorakh said in a mocking tone. "You give money for wrestling, don't you? He's your protégé. Well, he must pay you back in kind. If not..."

Without completing his sentence he looked at Savitri from the corner of his eye and then watched the changing expression on Nisar's face. Savitri looked uneasily at Gorakh.

Nisar brushed down his *tehmet* and got up, peeved.

"What rubbish are you talking?" he barked at Gorakh. "Bachchan is a gem of a man though he doesn't have money. A wrestler requires a lot of money to keep himself in trim. Can you show me another wrestler for miles around who is a match to him?"

"Huh!" Gorakh gave a derisive laugh. Savitri suddenly turned grave. Nisar proceeded to untie Nur.

"Now that it has been here for a week let it stay in the shed," Savitri said. "It'll be safe from the heat."

While going Nisar forgot to pick up his bunian. Savitri pushed it away to one side.

"Savitri!" Have you no compunction?" Gorakh said. "How dare you touch the cast-off clothes of a polluted man? Who doesn't know Nisar and his notorious cronies? He's a tout and gets a commission on the passengers he brings round to the bus. Is it an honourable job? He's a brawler and spends all his money on those boys in the wrestling pit."

"What's that to me?" Savitri said nonchalantly. "It doesn't affect me one way or the other how he makes his living. He comes here just to kill time. That's all there's to it."

Gorakh could see that she was trying to cover up her discomfiture by providing him with a plausible alibi.

"Just watch and wait," he said. There was an edge in his voice. "Nisar won't be able to sow his wild oats for long. I'm told from next month this bus route will be taken over by the government. Private buses will go off the road. It's only a matter of one more week. Then I'll see how Nisar feeds his goat on *arhar*. He won't even have a bunian on his back."

Savitri had other ideas about Nisar. He had been coming to her for the past many days. But he had never taken any liberties with her. Yes, he had held her arm the other day. But that was just to demonstrate his strength. He ran Nur four miles every morning. After that when he came to her panting, he said that if he didn't have sufficient exercise his body would become flabby. "Fatness and strength are not the same thing, Savitri." He was right, of course.

Sitting at the bus stand, Nisar was lost in his own thoughts. He went to Savitri just to while away the time. She was clever, vivacious, and he liked to look at her firm body. What good were those wretched drivers and cleaners? He didn't like their company. They drank and took opium to stimulate strength. Their strength drained away as the effect of the intoxicant wore off. It was like a stream overflowing its banks in the rainy season and then drying up

when the rains were gone. After he had been to the wrestling pit and finished with the bus he had the whole day to himself. What was wrong about spending the rest of the day with Savitri? What a large-hearted woman she was! That was one reason why so many people gathered in her shed. Then he remembered Nur and thought that he would bring it back from Savitri's shed. It must be missing him.

Suddenly he heard a noise in the distance. The tyres hissed over the stones on the road and a cloud of dust blinded his eyes. A bus sped past him, etching the pattern of the tyres on the road. The bus stopped and out came Makhan Lal, the bus owner. People gathered round him. They learned that in spite of his ceaseless efforts the government had not agreed to leave that route to the private operators. From the first of the next month government buses would ply on that route. He was in a hurry to get a private carrier's permit from the Transport Department at Lucknow. He may be able to engage one or two drivers. The rest would have to fend for themselves.

Gloomy news. Nisar's last hope was gone. Pulling out a bus cushion from a cabin he stretched himself on it, feeling distraught and listless. He had a slight headache. His thoughts turned to Savitri. No, he was alone in the world and would have to plough a lonely furrow in future too. And as for Gorakh — he had always seen him hobnobbing with Savitri. How he put on airs! As if he had a hold over her. For all he knew, she might even be submitting to his carnal desires. What else could you expect from a woman? A woman was a woman even if she had a man's strength.

He fell asleep. When he woke up the sun had gone down and the bus stop was steeped in silence. A lantern hung on a pole and under its dim light the knots of the pole shone like the skin of a python. Some cleaners had spread their beddings on the roofs of the buses and were preparing to sleep.

Nisar proceeded towards Savitri's house to take away Nur with him. When he came near the shed he was confronted with a stranger sight. A couple of policemen were carrying out a search in Savitri's house.

Things lay about in confusion. The contractor, his hand resting against his waist, was leaning against a pillar with bowed head, while Savitri was standing by, her alert eyes darting all over the room. "Go ahead, search every nook and corner," she said again and again. "But mind you, my things should not be damaged. Be careful, Havaldar Saheb, that box contains my glass bangles!"

People had collected outside the house, excitedly watching the goings-on. At last, the policemen took away the contractor to the police station. Nisar quietly untethered Nur from the shed, thinking that in the morning he would find out from Savitri herself the cause of this rumpus.

He tied Nur to the leg of his cot and tried to sleep. Then he realised that the month would be over in another five days. What would he do after that? What would he live on? How would he feed Nur? There was no hope of getting any sort of work in that town. As he lay on his cot, he turned Nur's head towards him and rubbing its mouth against his cheek held it against his neck. He fell asleep after some time.

The morning had far advanced. Putting his things in a small bundle and holding Nur by the rope he proceeded towards Savitri house.

"Didn't you take out Nur for its morning run?" Savitri asked. "Or are you thinking of fattening it up? It'll fetch a better price."

Nisar was cut to the quick. But he controlled himself.

"I'm going to Karimganj by the first bus," he said. "The chances of finding work here are very slender. My uncle lives in Karimganj. He may be able to find some work for me. I'll return in two or three days. Look after Nur in my absence." He tied Nur to the thatched door.

"There's still a lot of time for the bus," Savitri gave him a perfunctory look. "Where is the hurry?"

"No, the bus leaves quite early," Nisar said. "If I miss it my whole day will be spoiled." Taking big strides he turned towards the *pucca* road. Craning its neck, Nur watched him innocently.

Nisar was gone for ten days. From Karimganj he went to a neighbouring village, famous for its *tazias*. The *tazias* were in great

demand from far and near and work went on round the year. Nisar hoped to find some work there.

On his way back, the ramshackle *ekka* gave him so many jolts that every joint of his body seemed to have come loose. He was taken aback as he got down from the *ekka* at the bus stand. He knew what was coming but he was not prepared for what he saw. The whole scene had changed. Shining government buses were lined up at the bus stand and the drivers and the cleaners were strutting about, wearing khaki uniforms and boat-shaped caps. A sherbet shop run by the refugees had come up alongside the *piau*. Colourful festoons hung across a tin shed with a few more blue coloured buses standing under its roof. On one side lay a table and chair. A new era seemed to have begun.

Nisar was shocked. Where were they all gone? Those familiar, smiling faces which used to raise such glorious squabbles at the bus stand? And those card players under the tamarind tree? Also gone were the buses which used to growl and howl before they decided to move. The new buses were no doubt beautiful and sleek to look at. But they had deprived Nisar of his bread. His lips curled up with contempt. No, he would have nothing to do with these buses, much less travel in them. Hoping that Savitri's congenial company may give him some relief, he decided to go to her house.

He stopped in his tracks and looked up again. Yes, the house was locked. He stood stock-still for a moment and then turned to the nearby shop. "Sonu, do you know anything about Savitri," he asked the shopkeeper.

"Savitri?" Sonu gave Nisar a quizzical look. "I wish I knew. She was a clever woman. She has brought a bad name to the whole place. Did you ever hear of opium being pedalled in this part of the country?"

"Opium?" Nisar looked at him confused. "Tell me what happened. Don't talk in riddles."

"Yes, she used to sell opium," the shopkeeper said. "The police was trying to unearth the racket. They got a clue ten days ago and searched her house. But nothing incriminating was found. The police warned the contractor and let him go. Day before yesterday

they again raided her house. This time they were able to lay their hands on a quarter *seer* of opium. Gorakh used to bring the opium while Savitri sold it. The poor contractor is now in the police lock-up. But Savitri slipped away with Gorakh."

Nisar's strength suddenly ebbed away from his body. Spreading out his legs he sat down on the edge of the well.

"Do you know anything about my goat?" he asked getting over the initial shock. "Has she taken it away with her or left it with someone?"

"Oh, no, she sold away the goat. She sold it to Zahid, the butcher, at a throw-away price. She was in such desperate hurry, you know. Zahid was the only customer. She must have been badly in need of money."

Nisar's blood became thin like water. His teeth were clenched, his nostrils flared. His hand went under the fold of his *tehmet* and came out with a wad of dog-eared notes. He counted the notes. Fifty.

Bewildered, he went to Zahid butcher's shop. Pushing aside the reed curtain he glared at Zahid.

"For how much has she sold you my Nur?" he asked.

"Twenty-five! But Nisar *bhai*, I bought it only after she had assured me that you had sold it to her. Allah is my witness. I'm telling you the truth."

"Stop blabbing!" Nisar cried. "Give me my goat. I must have it at once." Nisar looked hard at Zahid. The butcher wilted under his gaze.

"But . . ." he said in a cringing voice. "But I killed the goat this morning. What more can I say? It's hanging there." He suddenly fell silent.

Molten lead seemed to be coursing through Nisar's vein. His hand slipped down the reed curtain. Nur, his companion of day and night, was helplessly hanging upside down from an iron hook.

His strength was gone. With great difficulty he walked up to the bus stand. The engines of the new buses were purring gently. They seemed to lack the power of the engines of the old private buses. The drivers and cleaners seemed to be dragging their feet like

lifeless men. He wondered if he had left all the gaiety and excitement of life behind and was now stepping into the world of the dead.

Should he go back to Karimganj and make *tazias*? *Tazias* in front of which walked a procession of mourners, beating their breasts and singing elegies, and ending up in front of the graveyard.

His heart was filled with contempt. No, not for him the world of the dead. He must have the thrills and excitement of the living and rub shoulders with the crowd.

Kicking up dust with his feet, he made for the village.

CALL THE NEXT WITNESS . . .

What more is there to tell? We lived as husband and wife, we did what a husband and wife are expected to do. But a real marriage has more to it.

I'm not talking through my hat. But, please, hear my tale in full. I hate to dole out information in dribbles. I'll tell you all like a tape recorder playing back. I have no way out and I know silence won't save me from the clutches of the law, nor guard me from people's looks or my child's awkward questions.

My life is like an open book. It has all the answers to your questions.

Yes, indeed, I was in love with Bishan long before I was given away in marriage. But what has that got to do with the present case? Oh, God! How you try to insinuate! I beg of you, please stop humiliating me!

No, I have no knowledge of Bishan's whereabouts. That was twenty-two years ago. No, we made no promises. No, no, no, no. He wasn't present at my wedding. There was no question of any threat. Bishan was not that sort of man. He was much too intelligent, and level headed for this kind of thing.

Why do you try to read meanings into my words? Did I ever say to you that I still love him? You are welcome to think as you like. But I have the right to call a spade a spade.

My love for Bishan was just an adolescent infatuation like any teenage girl would have for a boy, any boy. I never said that we did not meet! But take my word, after I was married, I saw no more of him.

Oh, how you insinuate! I tell you, my husband loved me with all his heart. And I? Well, that was for him to say if he were alive.

No, there's not a grain of truth in that. How can you get at the true facts if you keep on asking loaded questions? They have no bearing on the case. You will not get anywhere if you pursue that line.

You want to know about my last night with my husband? You want me to make up some story which may help your blind and deaf law to get me? But the truth is that, that last night was like any other night — in any other home.

Did I? No, I did not taunt him. No, he was not in a temper. We did not quarrel. The last many years it'd been the same humdrum, peaceful life. What else did we have in common? Well, we shared our worries.

The child? She slept by our side in a small cot. Yes, that's right. We have only two rooms, one of which serves as the sitting room. He went out for a walk in the evening. Sometimes he was late from his walks. But that evening he returned in time. He brought toffee for the child.

That's right. He was on the staff of a government publication. Yes, as a photographer. He never changed his profession. He had faith in himself. He believed that one day he would make his mark as a photographer.

No, he never photographed models. No, not even as a side profession. Even if he had it would not have led to any estrangement between us. As far as he was concerned, I was the most beautiful girl, woman, wife — call it what you like — in the world.

You smile. I know I am plain. But if you looked at me through my husband's eyes you would understand what I mean. The camera, me and, of course, our daughter. That was all he cared for. Sometimes when I rested my head against his chest his fingers would press over my earlobes — the same way as he presses over the shutter of his camera. Those were the most precious moments of our lives.

I'm sorry; I should have realised that you are not concerned with our intimate life. But how else can you look for the cause? It's only by groping in the dim, gloomy, corridors of my life that you may find the truth. Except these rare moments, our life was a dreary journey. We drifted along, hoping to find a haven.

I'm sorry, once I start talking I just go on and on. I can't help it. If you want to record my statement in question-answer form I do not mind. Please go ahead.

He was attached to the Press Information Bureau before he joined the government journal. Again, as a photographer. As I've told you, he stuck to his vocation. In the beginning, when he used to cock one eye at me, while the other was closed, I used to laugh. When I recall those days, I smile. Winking became a habit. It looked silly. But it was because of the camera. Sometimes it annoyed me. But later, I learnt that when he closed one eye, the other was always looking at me and at no one else.

He was in the Press Information Bureau for about five years.

Six years with the government journal.

Yes, about four and a half years with an advertising agency.

Yes, in the end he gave up his job. Rather, he was forced to give it up. Not that there was any stink about it.

You have all the facts before you. You must have also received the government report by now. You are right. I know little about his official duties. The only thing I know is that in the early period of our married life he was very enthusiastic about his work and went about it with great gusto.

Yes, precisely. I'm talking about his photographic assignments.

What kind of photographs? As I've told you, he was an official photographer. The Fifteenth August, state banquets, foreign dignitaries, ceremonial parades, receptions, inaugurations.

And then, when the Republic Day celebrations began, girls also started figuring in his photographs — march pasts, folk dances and all that. There were all sorts of photographs.

One thing is important. After joining the government journal he took a special delight in taking shots of fields, dams, power plants, *vanamahotsavs*, mills, new railway lines, new bridges and the like.

They exhilarated him. They were the first fruits of Independence, he used to say. But after some time his interest in these things suddenly vanished. I often found him brooding. Once he said these photographs meant nothing. "Who says photographs never lied?" he used to ask loudly.

It was the first time that day that I noticed that his eyes were bloodshot. After that they never got better.

It was in those days that something untoward happened. Some minister made a public statement that the planting of trees had arrested the march of Thar Desert in the eastern reaches. My husband's photographs of the desert did not bear out the minister's contention. There was no forest anywhere — only a bleak, arid desert. The saplings that had been planted dried up through neglect. One of these photographs found its way into the journal through oversight. A member of the Opposition created quite a furore over it on the floor of the Lok Sabha. To err is human and my husband was no exception. But he was taken to task. It became difficult for him to stay on that job any longer. He tossed in bed the whole night. In the morning I found that his pillow was stained with blood.

We fell on bad times.

He quit his job. After that he joined an advertising agency. It wasn't much of a job. He was there for two or three hours of the day. It was then that our daughter was born.

The arrival of the child gave us a new lease of life. She kept our minds diverted.

No, he never drank.

Not even when he was working with the advertising agency.

No, he never spent the night away from home.

He never complained about his luck.

He was always nice to me.

Photographs? There must be between four to six thousand photographs.

Photographs? There must be between four to six thousand photographs.

I've told you. We were passing through a difficult period of our lives.

He earned about two hundred rupees a month.

Yes, precisely! It was then that I sought a job.

Yes, in a school. A teaching job in a school.

The manager? He visited us once in a while.

No, my husband never objected to his coming.

Yes, sometimes he accompanied me to the school.

The child stayed with him. After he lost his job at the advertising agency he was at home most of the time.

He started his own business. Occasionally he managed to sell a photograph or two to newspapers and journals. He improvised a dark room in the bathroom. He took a lot of photographs of our daughter, some of which appeared in the newspapers. But there was hardly any money in that. We managed on my salary.

Please, for God's sake, don't humiliate me. Of course, I went to the manager's house! But does that mean anything? For that matter I came here too.

If you insist I'll take back my words. What can I do? When my heart is overflowing words just pour out of my mouth. Please... I... I... well, I take back my words.

I'm going on to be thirty-eight. At that time I must have been thirty-two.

The manager must have been sixtyish. Yes, he said so once. And I told him that the manager did not appreciate his coming to the school morning and evening. It was a girl's school. The manager had his own ideas about decorum.

I tell you again, do not read anything into this. It may sound all right in fiction, but the grim realities of life are different. Please don't make fun of me. The manager, the editor and other friends often came to the house with my husband. They were the sort of people one meets in a busy, work-a-day world. They could as well have been lawyers, doctors, contractors or engineers. What are you driving at? Must you demean me like this?

The editor? His was a rag-bag type of a paper. Professional interests brought them together.

No, the school didn't pay us any salary for the summer vacation. We were paid off when the school closed for the summer and reappointed when the new session started. During those two months we were really hard up for money.

It's wrong to say that I gave up my job because of that editor. There was no bad blood between him and the manager. Not on my account, anyway. But the editor was a petty-minded swindler. Everyone was afraid of him. In fact, his paper was the root of all trouble.

No, no... don't blame my husband for it! I knew the blame would ultimately recoil on me, that it would tear my life to shreds. I know your game too well — that you're trying to drag me over the coals. Is it the function of law to collect all sorts of evidence and brand an innocent person guilty? How am I responsible for my husband's death?

Why are you dragging me over the thorns? It is true that my husband had become quite friendly with the editor. I notice that you have underlined the word 'quite'. Well, do it, for all I care. But a mere word can't help you to unmask the truth. To get at the truth one has to reckon with many factors — a man's inclinations, circumstances, above all, his mental traits. A wife can't be the sole cause of her husband's happiness and sorrow. A husband and wife may love each other and yet be at cross-purposes. They may hold together and yet remain apart.

No, Sir, I do not teach philosophy. There are many words which are beyond my comprehension. I can't explain their true connotations. For that you had better consult a Hindi-English dictionary. Even then, I doubt if the definitions will explain what I've in mind. No, Sir, I'm not going to make a speech. I'll just narrate the bare facts.

You want me to explain what I mean by 'quite friendly'. Well, this friendship was based on self-interest. The editor often came to dine at our house. At my husband's invitation. No, I never went out

with him. I did not notice any lechery in his eyes. I know what you mean by lechery.

No, you've been misinformed. I was offered the job again after the summer vacation. No, I didn't leave it because of some squabbles between the manager and the editor. There's absolutely no truth in that statement.

Yes, his paper specialised in purveying scandals and blackmailing people.

No, the editor never made the manager the target of his attack. The fellow didn't blackmail him. How can you say I'm trying to shield him? To state facts as they are doesn't amount to taking sides. No, I didn't do so out of timidity, though I must admit that every woman is timid by nature.

It's wrong to say that my husband submitted himself to circumstances. You can't explain away his death by attributing it to such extraneous factors. If you're prepared to listen I'll tell you some significant facts...

As I told you, his eyes were always bloodshot. What happened after publication of that wrong photograph proved too much for him. Those very photographs which had taken him up the ladder now became his undoing. He thought he had drifted away from the truth. Now there was nothing left to him but to meekly toe the line. When it dawned upon him that the game was up, blood came in his eyes for the first time.

Yes, you may call them tears. But that would be stretching the meaning of the word too far. I'm not given to exaggeration, not at all. They were drops of blood.

Well, to come to the point. I resumed going to school, while he stayed at home most of the day.

It was a Sunday. He had sent the child to play at the neighbour's. No, we had not quarrelled. On the contrary, that day he was very demonstrative of his love for me. He asked me to take off my brassiere. It was daytime and I hesitated; but he was insistent. Then he asked me to wear a transparent voile sari. He took photographs of me in various postures, some of them in a recumbent position.

One of his eyelids kept fluttering; and then eight or ten drops of blood fell from his eyes. He looked terribly tired. He went to bed and kept staring at the ceiling. When I brought him a cup of tea I found that his eyes were suffused with blood. They looked gory. I placed the cup of tea on the teapoy, by the bedside. It lay there and went cold. Later, while taking his meal, he said that if he could earn some money he would go in for a telephoto lens and turn out scene quality work. The name of Karsh, Steichen, Smith, Paul, Kashinath, Parekh and others repeatedly came to his lips.

No, no, please don't start imagining things. There's nothing shady about these names, nor have they anything to do with me. Anyway, to come back to the statement, by evening he developed the film and made prints. He kept looking at the prints and then at his face in the mirror. I don't know what was going on in his mind. Then his eyes again filled with blood. That bleeding never stopped.

The editor published two of my photographs in the next issue. And that was the beginning of the trouble. The manager happened to see my semi-nude photographs and decided that I was the wrong person for a teaching job. He called me from the class, settled my account and asked me to leave.

No, I don't know why he bled from his eyes. I could do nothing about it except watch helplessly. I could be the cause of their bleeding. It could also be the photographs or the mirror. And if you want, you can also rope in Bishan, the manager and the editor. But why not heap the blame on me and be done with it?

No, I was not at home at the time.

The child? Yes, the child was very fond of him. Yes, she had seen the blood flowing from his eyes. She would often ask me: "Mummy, why are Papa's eyes bleeding?" My explanation didn't satisfy her. But soon she lost fear of him. While sitting in his lap she often wiped away the blood with her own handkerchief.

I have told you, I went out at eleven for an interview for a job. The child was away at school. He was alone in the house.

It was two days after I had lost my job at the school. When I left the house his eyes were bleeding — perhaps a little more than on other days. Nothing to cause alarm.

Yes, he hanged himself from the roofbeam. Rope? There was no rope. It was a bed-sheet.

I did not have a clue about it. I returned at about four. It was all over by then. His dead body had been laid on the bed. No, the bedsheet with which he had hanged himself was still dangling from the roof. He was covered up with another bedsheet. A policeman was keeping watch outside the house.

Who told me first? My daughter, of course! Yes, she returns from school at two. She was already there outside the door, waiting for me. When she saw me she ran up to me and clung to my legs. I fondled her head. She seemed to be bursting to tell me something. "Mummy, mummy," she said "Papa has suddenly got well. He's resting in bed." When I entered the room the whole thing became clear to me in a flash and I struck my head against the wall.

His lips and finger nails had turned blue. His face was sallow like that of a jaundiced person. His eyes were closed. There was not a trace of blood in them.

The verdict? It's anybody's guess. But the dice is always loaded against an individual. By individual, I mean the lone one. One like me. One like you, and you, and you.

IT'S A WIDE WIDE WORLD

Till two days ago she had also thought that the world was boundless. Convinced of its vastness she had ran away in the hope of finding an asylum somewhere. What good was life, she asked herself, if you had to look to others even for small mercies?

These thoughts came crowding on her mind as she sat alone on the railway platform, hoping that someone may yet turn up in search of her. That would have been so reassuring; she would have gone back to the house without losing face. She didn't know where else to go. She just sat there, brooding over her past...

Forty years ago she had been a different person with not a care in the world. Babu Saligram had just arrived at Talgaon, her small village, as its first Post Master. A postoffice had been newly opened in that area and besides Talgaon, it also handled the mail of the adjoining villages. Four postal peons, in khaki uniforms, bells tied to their lathis, went from village to village, distributing and collecting mail. The Post Master was taken to be a big shot in the village and regarded as the harbinger of the "new light" in the countryside.

The villagers would come, out of curiosity, to have a look at the brass buttons of Saligram's khaki tunic and he would utilise the occasion to unfold before them the mysteries of letter-writing and tell them how to drop their epistles into the letter-box. True to their rustic ways, the villagers would compare the letter-box to the mythical pillar which, according to the village headman, carried letters in the same way Hanuman had carried Sita's ring to Raja Ramchander.

In the twinkling of an eye, the villagers had provided Babu Saligram with the paraphernalia required to set up house. They had brought him a cot and foodstuff to cook his meals. The son of the village headman brought him a toothpick every morning. The people of Talgaon felt proud to have a "letter writing" and "middle pass" babu in their midst.

When a letter came from Harbhajan from the battle front across the seven seas it created quite a sensation in the village. Babu Saligram personally took the letter to Harbhajan's house. There were only two persons living in the house — Harbhajan's old mother and his young sister, Annapoorna. The "seven-hands" tall son was in the Army and on behalf of the British overlords was now giving battle to the enemy on the Turkish front.

That day Annapoorna had an opportunity of having a close look at the *dak babu* and the next day she had gone to him with a request to write a letter on her behalf to her valiant brother. When she entered the post office, Saligram was engaged in putting post marks on the letters and his hand remained arrested in the air as his eyes fell on her. After stating the purpose of her visit, she started speaking out the lines for Saligram to write them down on paper. "Brother, may my age be added on to your own. Brother, don't worry about us back home. Mother has developed cataract in one eye. She has in fact ruined her eyes with too much crying. Now everything looks so hazy to her. Brother, you are the only one we have in the world. Fight with all the caution that you can command..."

It was these letters that had brought Annapoorna and Saligram close to each other. As soon as a letter came Saligram would personally take it to Annapoorna's house and her mother would cry as she listened to the letter being read out to her.

And then the letters ceased coming. Saligram felt bad about it as if he had been bottled up within himself. The wait for the letter had become a life-time's waiting. He would keep looking for an envelope with a foreign stamp and give himself up to despair when none came. He seemed to have aligned his fate with Annapoorna's for he had developed an infatuation for her and didn't know what

to do about it. For some time he see-sawed between hope and despair and then things came to a head.

Finding no other way out, he and Annapoorna decided to take the final plunge. Eyebrows shot up, for they had done something which was considered anathema in those days. The two of them had gone in an *ekka* to the Arya Samaj mandir at Gursahaigunj where their marriage was solemnised without any fanfare. The people of Talgaon could not reconcile themselves to such an outrageous departure from the accepted code of conduct. The village headman went to the extent of asking the police inspector to shunt off the post master from the village and when he expressed his inability to do so, the headman came away fuming.

With hostile eyes turned upon them it became difficult for Saligram and Annapoorna to live in the village. At last, when the Government turned down his request for a transfer, he had to give up his job and leave the village with Annapoorna.

That was how forty years ago circumstances had conspired against Annapoorna, forcing her to leave her village. Her mother, who like any Hindu woman, spurned the idea of spending her last days under the tutelage of a son-in-law, decided to stay back in the village.

Saligram's people had also turned their faces against his wife. "We do not know what kind of a woman she is," they had said. "Even her shadow should not fall on the girls of our family." On Sundays when Saligram and Annapoorna passed through the lane on their way to the Arya Samaj, curtains in the windows started fluttering and curious eyes peeped at them from behind them.

As she sat on the railway platform thinking of those events of forty years back, her mind was filled with trepidation. Would she have to face a similar situation when she went back to her house? Would they condescend to receive her? They might even chase her away. When the mind is confronted with uncertainties of the future it starts groping in the past.

Though Saligram had set up a grocery shop which had kept them going, she had not been able to wipe off the stigma of this marriage. The doors of both places seemed to be closed on her; she

could neither go back to her own village nor return to her husband's people.

At the time of his marriage Saligram had written a letter to his elder brother from Talgaon, mentioning about his wife. "Bhai Saheb, you will be pleased to see the girl," he had written. "She is tall and healthy, wheat-complexioned and has a broad forehead. I gave the matter deep thought before marrying her."

His brother had taken the letter around, reading it out to all and sundry. "Look at the shameless fellow!" he would say with a malicious grin. "How he goes about bruiting her charms! Broad forehead indeed! I tell you, I won't allow the fellow to set foot in my house."

From that time Annapoorna's beauty had become a subject of jest. Saligram died after ten years of his marriage and life became a hard grind for Annapoorna. At last she went away to live with the family of her husband's younger brother where she had been awaiting her end for the last thirty years.

"God knows how long this woman is going to last," they would say at her back. "She doesn't show any sign of kicking the bucket!"

And even though her body had decayed, the old joke still kept chasing her. "Just look at her broad forehead! And her wheatish complexion!"

The jokes pierced her heart like an arrow and she wished she could disappear from the house for good. It's a wide wide world, she would say to herself. Surely, there must be a small nook some place where she could go and hide her head.

In the evenings she carried up bucket after bucket of water to cool off the roof where they slept during the summer. Breathless with exertion, she would sit down on the parapet in the muggy summer heat, lazily watching the kites wheeling in the sombre sky. Beyond the thick cluster of acacia trees she could hear the whistle of a railway engine, its piercing sound adding to her restlessness. Then her gaze would get stuck on top of the neem tree, where birds were hopping from branch to branch, making raucous noises before settling down for the night. The darkness descending over the evening haze would slowly obliterate from view a torn paper

kite, entangled in one of the branches, fluttering gloomily in the breeze.

She attended to all the chores in the house, doing all the sweeping, washing and cleaning. She had been doing it for years now — the same rooms, the same doors, the same almirahs and alcoves, the kitchen filled with smoke, the utensils dark with soot and the same dark smell of unwashed clothes. The darkness would descend over the houses, staid in their uniformity, ending in a tired and listless morning, followed by a long afternoon, like life itself, wearily dragging its feet towards the evening.

Under the murky sky, the rooftops stretched far away, ending in a thick cluster of acacia trees, beyond which one heard the whistle of a railway engine. The train hurtled past, shaking the earth out of its placidity, and again the same thickening layers of gloom.

Then she got heart trouble and her people, who had no time to nurse her, dumped her in the hospital. It's just the place for the likes of her, they said. Quickly putting together a change of clothes, one glass tumbler, two plates and one spoon in a small tin trunk, a servant rushed her to the hospital.

Lying in the hospital bed, as the evening approached. Annapoorna would start looking towards the door, hoping that someone would call on her to enquire about her health. But no one ever came.

Then one day they discharged her from the hospital. Taking her tin trunk, she sat down outside the hospital gate, waiting for someone to come and take her home. She was feeling very low, not knowing where else to go.

The rattling sound of an *ekka* passing along the road decided her. And then she heard the whistle of a railway engine, as if coming from miles away. Every evening a train sped away in the direction of her old village.

It was indeed a wide wide world. For the first time she felt the strength in her feeble body. In the evening of her life she had suddenly thought of changing directions.

Getting down from the train with her tin trunk, she took an *ekka* to Talgaon and got down outside the village temple. Nothing much

had changed. Some trees had been felled, others were still standing, awaiting their turn. Only the walls of the big mansion of the Thakurs had crumbled and once where there was a pasture they had erected a new school building.

Holding the small tin trunk under her arm, Annapoorna entered the village. A few new houses had come up and others had roofs of corrugated sheets in place of thatched ones. Every thing was vaguely familiar. When she came to her house she found it in ruins. The door frame had decayed and warped. One of the mud walls had fallen and over it a wild berry tree had sent down its roots. She felt utterly forlorn as she stood there gazing at what remained of her old house. A man who had been watching her asked her whom she was looking for.

"Aren't you Sobran's son?" she asked.

The man nodded.

"Don't you know me? No, you won't be able to recognise me. I'm your aunt, don't you know? If Sobran had been living he would have recognised me at once."

An old woman came forward to meet Annapoorna, but after making a casual enquiry she lost interest in her and went away. Sobran's son gave her shelter for the night and when she woke up in the morning he wanted to know where she was bound for.

"I came to see my old village," Annapoorna said. "I felt so nostalgic about it. I will go away in the evening."

In the evening she got into an *ekka* and returned to the railway station.

The only train of the day was already gone. She spent the night on the railway platform, wondering if they had called at the hospital to enquire about her. What would they have thought when they did not find her at the hospital? That she had deserted them? For all she knew, they might be searching for her all over the place. Under such circumstances should she really go home? But where else could she go? Suddenly the whole world seemed to have shrunk.

As she sat there she visualised the whole scene. It was the same lane, the same house, and there was the same neem tree in front of

the house from whose branches a torn paper kite kept fluttering gloomily in the breeze. The world seemed to be only that big.

She had returned to town by the morning train. How she wished that someone had come to meet her at the station! It would have made her feel so good. And she would not have felt embarrassed at this forced homecoming. But she just kept sitting at the station till the noise and bustle subsided. The passengers were gone and along with them the coolies had also disappeared.

It was a small station serving a small town. The next train was due in the evening. The station master had locked up his office and gone to his quarters. The railway platform looked deserted. A small, narrow road took off from the station. On one side of the road was a thick cluster of acacia trees and beyond it, visible at a distance, was a house. On this side was the rail track over which the train ran. After making a round of the wide wide world, the train would once again return to the same point.

THE ALIEN CITY

He had been told that his ancestors had come from a village, that they were tillers of the soil. Then, someone in the family acquired a smattering of the three R's, and his steps began to take him towards the Tehsil. Well, the family had to go to the market town anyway, to sell their produce, but that was different, that was more like going to a fair. He had heard that his great-grandfather would start preparing for this journey two days in advance; that he would tie new ropes to the bullock-cart, grease his moustaches with butter, then, tying a turban on his head and stacking the cart with big bundles, set off for the town. And, on his return, he would bring with him *jalebis* prepared in ghee, *batashas* from the temple of Ganga Devi, and some holy water in a leather flask.

Besides these, he had been told a few other things, too: that a boy in the family had turned out to be a good-for-nothing, who didn't want to stick to a peasant's life. He was none other than his own grandfather. He it was who had picked up a few words of Urdu, and had the audacity to serve water and the like to the sahibs who spoke in English. About cattle, there was hardly a thing which he did not know; and because of that, he had been given a job in the slaughterhouse of the town, on a salary of three rupees per month. He would make a nice bit of extra money too, for no one whose cattle was caught could get away without greasing his palm. In this way, his total income would add up to some three and a half rupees per month.

That had been the first contact of his ancestors with that smallish town. And there again, was the man's only son born named Durga Dayal after the Goddess Durga.

Later, Durga Dayal won a great name in that town. Whenever he thinks of this, Sukh Bir's mind begins to get agitated. All sorts of memories come crowding into his mind — all related, in some way or other with the period after his mother's death. He recollects faintly that he had a mother, but of her face he remembers absolutely nothing.

It was the Holi festival. Had it been some other occasion, Sukh Bir wouldn't have remembered anything of it. He was going in a bus, when some mischievous boy threw a balloon, full of coloured water, which burst, striking against the shoulder of a woman sitting next to him! It was then that he had suddenly realised that it was Holi.

Whenever any festival draws near, Sukh Bir begins to feel restless. It is fifteen years now since he started to live in Delhi, yet he does not feel that he belongs to the place; he just cannot call it his own.

And who does? Talk to anyone, and he will begin to remember his own town or village, and an alien look will come into his eyes. The heartstrings of each person are tied to some particular town or village, which he can call his own, the memories of which torment him... He remembers his old associates. They are still there, bound by the cords of kinship — with relatives, with family members, with near and dear ones. They all have something which they can call their own. At such moments, something begins to gnaw at Sukh Bir's heart, and his mind goes back to the town of his birth.

And then begins a chain reaction. The moment he thinks of his father's 'renown', a voice — an old voice — begins to ring in his ears, like hammer blows: "Is there anyone so generous and brave as will stand surety for me?"

His father, standing on the roof of the house, was shouting at the top of his voice, while the police surrounded the place. Quite a few neighbours stood at a distance, watching the 'fun'.

Sukh Bir had just then returned from school. He was dumbfounded at the sight, and could not understand a thing. The police were accompanied by seven or eight other persons, wearing turbans, who sat on the platform of the temple, with *lathis* in their hands. Their eyes were bloodshot. A strange kind of silence prevailed in the atmosphere.

The door of the house was bolted from the inside and his father stood on the roof, shouting, "Is there anyone so generous and brave as will stand surety for me?"

There was whispering among the neighbours as soon as their eyes fell on Sukh Bir. "Perhaps he will open the door now! What if the police arrest the boy?"

Then Sukh Bir had looked around him, with frightened eyes. It was as though no one had recognised him. Like pigeons, they had turned their eyes away from him, and all the while, his father was shouting from the roof of the house, wiping his perspiration.

Frightened, Sukh Bir stood close to the plank of the sweetmeat seller's shop. It was then that the sweetmeat seller's wife had said to him, "Go! Run away from here, or the police will catch hold of you!"

The words, uttered lovingly and yet with a tinge of contempt, still ring in Sukh Bir's ears.

That was his own town, his own lane, and those were his own people. His father was shouting for help, and no one was so much as uttering a word in reply. It had then occurred to him that if his mother were alive, she would have at once opened the door and hidden him in the *pallu* of her *dhoti*. Fears and loneliness had brought tears to his eyes and, carrying his satchel under his arm, he had run away, in the direction of his school.

From that day on, his father's growing 'reputation' had become a source of depression to Sukh Bir. He had loved his father very deeply. But, day after day, fresh stories would spread in the town. The way in which people talked about his father hurt him. Their eyes would be filled with contempt, at the sight of which Sukh Bir's heart would grow heavy. He had begun to hate both himself and his father.

The incident of that day, with the police surrounding the house and the crowd enjoying the whole sorry spectacle, had left a scar on his memory.

That house of his and those bifurcating lanes, resembling the twin legs of a pyjama let out to dry on the ground, with wild pigeons flying about and swallows circling over his head and the thin, small chimney of the baker's shop emitting smoke like a lighted cigarette, and the house of Mukhtar Sahib, with its two windows like a pair of spectacles — those lanes and that house of his, everything had become alien to him.

Durga Dayal had abducted a girl! Hence the police warrant. Hence, too, his cry for help from the roof of the house: "Is there anyone so generous and brave as will stand surety for me?"

Dixitji had then stepped forward from among the crowd, and Durga Dayal had opened the door and handed himself over to the police. During the time that the case went on, life had become miserable for Sukh Bir. At last, Durga Dayal had won the case and married the girl.

From that very moment, that house had become an alien place. He recoiled from walking out into the streets of the town. Everywhere, he would hear such remarks as: "There goes the scoundrel's son!" For many, many days, he had to listen to them, hanging his head in shame. Whenever he happened to glance at his father's face, he found it free from any trace of remorse or regret. His father was happy and did not give a hoot for the world.

There were, of course, such people too in the town who were on good terms with his father and continued to have social relations with him. They would praise him, and were perhaps overawed by him.

Quite a number of things were wrongly linked with his father's name, things with which he had had nothing to do, and these, like pointed arrows, rankled in Sukh Bir's heart.

And now he had been away from his house for the last seven years. Times were changing and distances were increasing. All those props of life, which had kept the mind intact, were now gradually cracking up, one by one. It would appear to Sukh Bir that his relationship with his father, too, had ended as far back as twenty years ago — ever since he had found it possible to move out on his own. He had run away in order to be free from that torment. And Durga Dayal, too, had, without any qualms, given the go-by to the idea of his relationship with him. Sukh Bir had neither a home nor anyone whom he could call his own.

But Durga Dayal's life still flowed on, like a river in spate, despite his declining years. And Sukh Bir had never been able to fathom the secret of this well-being. His father had told him clearly a number of times: "I do not need you. I have the whole world before me. There are a dozen persons who are ready to stand by me. I don't care if you cannot put up with my ways!"

And Sukh Bir had never had the strength to fight him.

Fifteen years ago, he had left home and come away. He had no knowledge of the source of his father's income. All that he knew was that his father adored the girl he had abducted.

But, whenever a festival draws near and Sukh Bir learns about it, he has a craving that he too, should sit with someone and while away the time. He feels envious of his father living like a lord.

Now, when he thinks about it, it seems to him that he and his father have nothing in common, that they stand apart, like two independent entities...

That storm had suddenly subsided, and a terrible silence had followed. With time, he and his father had become more and more estranged. The estrangement continued and the distance between them was constantly increasing. Why was it that, in the end, everyone stood alone?

For the last six years, Sukh Bir has not been home, has not met his father... He did not go home even when his stepmother died. He had heard that, at the death of his stepmother, his father had wept bitterly, had kept her body in his lap for full twenty-four hours, that he had bolted the door from the inside, that eventually the neighbours had had to pull him out of the house for the last rites of the deceased to be performed. He had loved things with an undivided mind; like a blind man, he had trusted every stick that came his way. He would lay down his life for anyone. He would face any hardships while serving others, and would say: "What is there that I do not have? There is a whole world before me..."

Once, in an impulsive moment, he had written a letter:

"Dear Father,

You are now left all alone. If you don't like it there, come and stay with me."

In reply his father had written to say that he would not be happy in an alien town:

"Here, I have my own people. I have a house, and there is a lot to do. Dixit's daughter is getting married. Puttan is lying in the hospital with an injury. There has been a theft in Banke's house, and I am well on the way to tracing the culprit. It is not possible for me to come away at this time."

Then, one day, Sukh Bir had gone home. And Durga Dayal had said to him: "You are fond of living in big cities. You may stay there. But there is nothing that I lack here. Every thatch is mine, every house is like my own house! I do, however, need some money. If you can manage to send thirty or forty rupees a month, I shall be happy."

Since then, he has been sending the money. That is all the relationship that exists between them. Once in six months, a stray letter comes in. For a moment, on getting this letter his heart is all aflutter. But then everything changes.

In fact, once, just when he was thinking of reviving all old relationships, a letter had come from Dixitji, asking about the whereabouts of Durga Dayal, saying that the latter had been missing from home for the last one month. "The marriage of my

daughter is taking place next month," Dixitji had written, "and I had entrusted Durga Dayal with some ornaments, and asked him to get them done up. But, ever since the ornaments were given to him, he has been missing from his home. I never thought that I would be duped so badly! If Durga Dayal happens to be with you or if you know anything about his whereabouts, please do let me know."

Sukh Bir's head had reeled upon reading Dixitji's letter. "What has he done! Has he fallen so low as to run away with wedding ornaments?"

Then a telegram had come from Dixitji, and Sukh Bir was obliged to go to his town in search of his father. He had gone straight to Dixitji, and the latter was hardly able to speak. "What will become of me now, Sukh Bir?" he had stammered. "My reputation will be reduced to dust! There are only eight days to the marriage! What can I possibly do in such a short time?"

"Lodge a report with the police and get the rascal arrested!" someone had suggested, and Sukh Bir's heart had been filled with a feeling of contempt. But then, what else *could* be done? He could not lift his head for shame.

But the next day his father had come back. Placing the newly made ornaments before Dixitji, he had said, "Here, take them, Panditji, but never trust me again, not even if I ask you to. I had lost these ornaments in gambling. I have barely managed to recover my reputation!"

That had added to Sukh Bir's humiliation. Both he and his father had shouted at each other, and had declared that they would never see each other's face again.

But, despite all that, his heart had again welled up with love, and he had once again set out to meet his notorious father. He just didn't feel at home in the alien city.

It was a holiday on account of Holi. He had rolled up his bedding and had left. But, upon reaching home, he had found the door locked.

It was a holiday on account of Holi. He had rolled up his bedding and had left. But, upon reaching home, he had found the door locked.

The lanes lay, as before, like the twin legs of a pyjama let out to dry, swallows and pigeons circled over his head, the baker's chimney emitted smoke, the Mukhtar's house stood with spectacles on... But, on his house, there was a lock! The neighbours, seeing him after so many years, paid no particular attention to him.

Sukh Bir's heart beat violently. All sorts of doubts began to rise in his mind. "I hope he hasn't runaway again, after abusing someone's trust..."

At Dixitji house, he was informed that the old man had seen Durga Dayal two days back, but, as to where he had gone on the eve of Holi, no one knew. "He looked worried. He owes money practically to everyone here..."

Sukh Bir stayed at Dixitji's house for a day. Holi was duly celebrated. The road, the lanes were all bespattered with colour. On the walls of houses, colourful flowers appeared, the handiwork of the syringes of the Holi players. Platforms of houses were covered with red *gulal*, but his notorious father was nowhere to be seen.

The next day, when he was about to depart and had taken leave of Dixitji, he found that the door of his house was lying open! With a heavy heart, he knocked at it. Durga Dayal came out.

"Where were you, Father?"

"When did you come, Sukh Bir?" Durga Dayal asked, without answering the question put to him.

"I came yesterday. I came to you thinking that you would be all alone on the eve of Holi. But the house was locked."

Durga Dayal's eyes filled with tears. "I went away. What is there for me to do here? I feel a stranger in this town. All is over and done with. They treat me like a stranger even over petty sums of money. The very fellows who were once my near and dear ones! With these very hands, I have squandered so much, Sukh Bir, but now there is no one whom I can call my own!"

"Come away with me to Delhi. That city, too, is alien, Father, but still..."

"There is no escape from this alienness, Sukh Bir, neither here nor there!"

Durga Dayal's muddy eyes brimmed with tears, and he bade good-bye to Sukh Bir. At the time of parting, all that he could say was: "You carry on with your work with an undivided mind, Sukh Bir. Don't worry about me. Only keep writing now and then."

And Sukh Bir came back to his work ... and learned to think that a man, every man in this world is in possession of two cities — one where he is born, where someone he calls his own lives, dwells ... and the other where he comes to earn a living and loses out on living itself.... A third doesn't exist. Not at all.

Time and again, he has thought of his town... of the city in which he lives himself and which has remained alien for him uptill now, and of that town, too, in which Durga Dayal lives and which has become alien for his father also.

A DEATH IN DELHI

A shroud of fog covers everything. It is after nine in the morning, but all of Delhi is entwined in the haze. The streets are damp. The trees are wet. Nothing is clearly visible. The bustle of life makes itself known in sounds, sounds which fill the ears. Sounds are coming from every part of the building. As on other days, Vaswani's servant has lit the stove, and its sizzling can be heard beyond the wall. In the adjoining room, Atul Mavani is polishing his shoes. Upstairs the Sardarji is putting Fixo on his beard. The bulb behind the curtain over his window is gleaming like an immense pearl. All the doors are closed and all the windows are draped, but in every part of the building there is the bustle of life. On the third floor, Vaswani has closed the bathroom door and turned on the faucet.

Buses are rushing through the fog, the whine of their heavy tyres coming nearer and then fading into the distance. The sidewalks are crowded, but each person wrapped in fog looks like a drifting wisp of cotton.

Those wisps of cotton are advancing silently into the sea of haze. The buses are crowded. People are huddled on the cold seats and in their midst are some figures hanging like Jesus from the cross: arms outstretched, without nails in their hands but the icy, shining rods of the bus.

In the distance a funeral procession is coming down the street.

This must be the funeral I just saw mentioned in the newspaper: "The death occurred this evening at Irwin Hospital of Seth Diwanchand, the well-known and popular Karolbagh business

magnate. His body has been taken to his home. Tomorrow morning at nine o'clock the funeral will proceed by way of Arya Samaj Road to the Panchkuin cremation ground for the last rites."

This must be his bier coming up the street now. Walking silently and slowly behind it are some people wrapped in mufflers and wearing hats. Nothing can be seen very clearly. . .

There is a knock at my door. I put the paper aside and open the door. Atul Mavani is standing there.

"I have a problem, friend. No one showed up today to do the ironing. Could I use your iron?" Atul's words are a relief. On seeing him, I had been afraid that he might bring up the question of joining the funeral procession. I give him the iron at once, satisfied that now he'll iron his pants and then go off on a round of the embassies.

Ever since reading about Seth Diwanchand's death in the paper, I had been apprehensive that someone or other would show up and suggest joining the funeral despite the cold. All the people in this building were acquainted with him. They are all genteel and sophisticated people.

Then the Sardarji's servant comes down the stairs muttering, opens the door and goes out. To reassure myself, I call out, "Dharma! Where are you going?"

When he answers, "To buy butter for the Sardarji," I quickly hold out the money for him to get me some cigarettes at the same time.

The Sardarji is sending out for butter for his breakfast, which means that he too is not planning to take part in the funeral procession. I am still further relieved. Since Atul Mavani and the Sardarji are not planning to go, it's out of the question for me. Those two and the Vaswani family were more frequent visitors at Seth Diwanchand's place. I only met the man four or five times. If they aren't planning to attend, then the question of my going doesn't even arise.

Mrs Vaswani has appeared on the front balcony. There is a strange sort of whiteness on her attractive face, and a light touch of redness from the lipstick she wore last evening. She has come out

wearing just a robe, and is fastening up her hair. Her voice rings out: "Darling, bring me some paste, please."

I'm further reassured. This means that Mr Vaswani is not attending the rites either.

Far down on Arya Samaj Road, the funeral procession is slowly approaching. . .

Atul Mavani comes to return the iron. Having taken it, I want to close the door, but he comes in and says, "Did you hear that Seth Diwanchand died yesterday?"

"I just read about it in the paper," I answer him immediately, to keep discussion of the matter from going any further. Atul's face is shining. He must have just shaved.

"He was really a fine man, that Diwanchand."

I'm afraid that if the comments proceed any further there's going to be a moral responsibility for me to join the funeral procession. So I ask, "What happened about that business of yours?"

"Just that the machine is late in arriving. As soon as it comes, my commission can start. This commission work is really senseless. But what's to be done? If I arrange to place eight or ten machines, I'll start my own business." Atul continues by saying, "Brother, Diwanchandji gave me a lot of help when I first came here. It's because of him that I got some sort of work. People really respected him."

My ears prick up at the name of Diwanchand. Then the Sardarji puts his head out of the window and asks, "Mr Mavani, what time does it start?"

"Well, the time was nine o'clock, but it will probably be late because of the cold and the fog." This must be a reference to the funeral.

The Sardarji's servant Dharma has given me the cigarettes and is setting out tea on the table upstairs. Then Mrs Vaswani's voice is heard, "I think Premila will definitely be there. Don't you agree, darling?"

"Well, she ought to be," Mr Vaswani says, crossing the balcony.
"Hurry up and get ready."

"Will you be coming to the coffee-house this evening?" Atul asks me.

"Probably." I wrap the blanket around me and he goes back to his room.

A moment later his voice comes again, "Is the electricity on, brother?"

"Yes, it's on," I answer, knowing that he must be using an electric immersion rod to heat the water.

"Polish!" The shoeshine boy announces politely in his daily fashion, and the Sardarji calls him upstairs. The boy sits outside and starts polishing, while the Sardarji instructs his servant to bring lunch promptly at one o'clock. "Fry some *papads*, and make a salad as well."

I know the man's servant is a scoundrel. He never delivers a meal on time, nor does he cook what the Sardarji wants.

Thick fog still covers the street outside, with no signs of sunshine. The No. 7 bus is leaving, with its crucified Christs hanging inside; and a conductor is distributing advance tickets to other people standing in a queue. The jingle of coins can be heard each time he returns the change. In the midst of the cotton balls wrapped in haze, the dark-uniformed conductor looks like Satan himself.

And the funeral procession has now come somewhat closer.

"Shall I wear a blue sari?" Mrs Vaswani asks.

The muffled sound of Vaswani's answer suggests that he is fixing the knot on his tie.

The servant has brushed the Sardarji's suit and draped it on a hanger. The Sardarji is standing in front of the mirror tying his turban.

Atul Mavani shows up again, portfolio in hand. He has put on the suit he had made last month. His face looks fresh and his shoes are shining. "Aren't you going?" he asks. Before I can ask "Going where?" he calls out, "Come on Sardarji! It's getting late—it's past ten o'clock."

Two minutes later, the Sardarji is coming downstairs. Meanwhile Vaswani spots Mavani's suit from upstairs and enquires: "Where did you get that suit tailored?"

"Over in Khan Market."

"It's very well made. I'd like to get the tailor's address from you." Then he calls to his wife, "Come on, dear! All right, I'll be waiting for you downstairs." Joining Mavani and the Sardarji, he feels the suit material. "The lining is Indian?"

"English!"

"It's an excellent fit," he says, jotting down the tailor's address in his diary. Mrs Vaswani appears on the balcony, looking even more immaculate in the damp, cold morning. The Sardarji winks at Mavani and starts whistling.

The bier is now directly below my room. A few people are walking with it, and one or two cars are creeping along. The people are engrossed in conversation.

Mrs Vaswani comes downstairs, a flower in her hair; and the Sardarji begins adjusting the handkerchief in his coat pocket. Before they get out of the door, Vaswani asks me: "Aren't you coming along?"

"You go ahead. I'll be right there," I say. But the next moment I wonder where he has asked me to go. I stand thinking about this as the four of them leave the house.

The funeral has moved on down the road. One car comes up from behind and slows near the procession. The driver exchanges a few words with one of the persons on foot in the procession, and then the car surges ahead. The two cars at the back of the procession also slip ahead, following that car.

Mrs Vaswani and the three others are heading for the taxi-stand. I keep watching them. Mrs Vaswani has put on her fur wrap, and the Sardarji is either offering his fur gloves to her or is just displaying them. The taxi driver steps up and opens the door, and the four of them get in. Now the taxi is heading this way, and I can hear laughter coming from inside it. Vaswani is pointing towards the procession and is telling the driver something.

I stand quietly, observing everything; and now for some reason I feel as though the least I could have done was to join Diwanchand's funeral procession. I am specially well acquainted with his son, and, at times like these, one even offers sympathy to enemies. The cold is making me lose my resolve but the question of joining the funeral keeps pricking me somewhere deep inside.

The taxi slows down near the bier. Mavani sticks his head out and says something. Then the taxi goes around to the right and moves ahead.

Feeling beaten, I put on my overcoat, slip on some sandals and go down the stairs. My feet propel me automatically towards the procession, and I quietly fall in behind the bier. Four men are carrying it on their shoulders, and seven others are walking alongside—the seventh being myself. I think about the difference that takes place as soon as a man dies. Just last year, when Diwanchand's daughter was married, there was a crowd of thousands, and cars were lined up in front of his house. . .

We have reached Link Road. Around the next turn is the Panchkuin cremation ground.

As soon as the procession turns the corner, I begin to see a crowd of people and a row of cars. There are some scooters also. The chatter of voices comes from a crowd of women standing at one side. Each of them has a different hair style, and they stand around with the same exuberance that one sees in Connaught Place. Cigarette smoke is rising from the crowd of men and blending into the fog. The red lips and white teeth of the women shine as they talk, and there is pride in their eyes. . .

The bier has been set down outside on a platform. Now there is silence. The scattered crowd has gathered around the body, and chauffeurs with bouquets and garlands of flowers in their hands are awaiting a look from their mistresses.

My eye falls on Vaswani. He's trying to signal his wife to go over by the corpse, but she is standing there talking to another woman. . .

The face of the corpse has been uncovered, and now the women are placing flowers and garlands around it. The chauffeurs, their duty done, stand near their cars, smoking.

One lady, after depositing a garland, takes a handkerchief from her pocket, puts it to her eyes, sniffles a little, and then steps back.

Now all the women have taken out hankies, and there is a sound of noses blowing.

Some of the men have lit incense and set it near the head of the corpse. They stand there unmoving.

It appears from the sound that the sadness in the hearts of the women has increased.

Atul Mavani has taken a paper from his portfolio and is showing it to Vaswani. I think it's a passport application.

Now the bier is being taken inside the cremation ground. The crowd stands outside the gate, watching. The chauffeurs have either finished their cigarettes or put them out, and are standing guard by their cars.

The bier has now gone inside.

The men and women who came to offer condolences are beginning to leave.

One can hear car doors opening and closing. The scooters are starting up and some people are heading towards the bus stop.

The fog is still thick. Buses are passing by on the road, and Mrs Vaswani is saying, "Premila has invited us over this evening. You'll come along, won't you, dear? There'll be a car for us. That's all right, isn't it?"

Vaswani is nodding his head in agreement.

The women departing by car are smiling and saying goodbye to each other. Several bye-byes can be heard. The cars start off. . .

Atul Mavani and the Sardarji are walking towards the bus stop, and I realise that if I had been prepared, I could have gone straight to work from here. But now it's eleven-thirty.

The pyre has been lit, and four or five men are sitting on a bench underneath a tree. Like me, they just happened to come inside.

Surely they must be taking the day off. Otherwise they'd have come ready to go on to work.

I can't decide whether to go home, clean up, and go to the office, or whether to use the excuse of a death to take the day off. After all, there was a death, and I did take part in the funeral procession.